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Marriage by capture

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Robert Buchanan

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CHAPTER I.

N the 7th day of January, 1890, as Father John O'Donnell, the parish priest of Mulrany, County Mayo, was quietly breakfasting in the coffee-room of the Shamrock Hotel, Westport, the head waiter, Dennis Macartney, an old and privileged retainer of the establishment, thus addressed him:

"You'll have come from Dublin

by the early morning train, Father John?"

"I have then, Dennis," replied the priest, leaning back in his chair.

"Did your reverence hear the news? Sure they'll have it in the papers this morning, and ugly news it is entirely."

"What news, Dennis, my man I slept all the way in the train, and drove straight to the hotel."

"Then read that, your reverence," said the waiter, placing in his hands a large handbill, moist from the press. "They're posting them over the town, and the peelers are sending the alarm all over the county, from here to Galway."

The priest adjusted his spectacles on his nose, and read as follows:—

"£100 *Reward.*

"*Last evening, as Miss Catherine Power, of Castle Craig, was*

being driven in her outside car from Newport to Ballyveeny, she was attacked by masked men, who were lying in ambush under the bridge on the Ballyveeny road. The driver, James Feeny, was struck down and rendered insensible. When he recovered his senses the horse and car were standing by him in the road, but his mistress had disappeared. He drove back into the village of Mulrany and gave information to the police. Up to daybreak this morning nothing has been heard or seen of the unfortunate lady, and it is feared that she has met with foul play. Any person who will give such information as may leaa to the identification of her assailants will receive the above reward.

"Police Barracks, Mulrany,

"Oct. 6th."

"Saints of heaven!" cried the priest, turning white as a sheet and springing to his feet. "Am I awake or dreaming? The butchering, cowardly villains! Have they murdered her at last?"

His plump and stalwart frame shook like a leaf, but he clenched his fist as if to strike some invisible foe.

"I knew it would be sad news to your reverence," said Dennis, with a doleful shake of the head.

"Sad news! It's like a knife in my heart, Dennis Macartney. My sweet young lady! The flower of all my flock! The prettiest and the best lady in all Ireland! And me away in Dublin when I should have been watching and praying by her side! Give me my stick, Dennis—my hat and my stick. I'll never ate and I'll never rest till I've

discovered the villains and hunted them down."

"Captain Kennedy's in the stable yard, sir, if you'd like to spake to him."

The priest nodded fiercely, and strode away, brandishing his stick. As he passed out of the back door he came face to face with a tall, clean-shaven, military-looking man who was entering the hotel. In the yard beyond was an outside car, harnessed to which was a horse dripping with perspiration, and close to the car was a group of ostlers and armed police.

"What's this, Captain Kennedy, what's this?" cried the priest. "Is it the truth I've heard, or some horrible invintion?"

"It's the truth, Father John," answered Kennedy, touching his cap. "Miss Power was attacked

again last night, and though we've been scouring the country, we can't find a trace of her."

"God help us!" gasped Father John, with the tears streaming down his honest cheeks.

"It's a strange affair entirely. We found the poor lady's cloak not far from the river-side, and the grass was all trampled down as if there had been a desperate struggle. Half a mile away, on the hill-side, we found a small lace handkerchief, with stains of blood on it. Jim Feeny says that, just as he came to, he heard an awful scream from down the river, but he was in dread of his own life, and drove right away to the barracks."

"Dead! Murdered! Oh, Catherine, Catherine, pulse of my heart, my dear young lady!"

"If she's dead, your reverence,

it's strange that we can find no trace of the body. We've dragged the river as far as Ballycroy, and found nothing whatever. There's just a chance that it may have been carried down to the salt water, for there was a flood last night, but that doesn't seem likely."

"And the scoundrels who did it? The butchering, murdering cowards?" cried the priest, clinging tremulously to the police captain.

"Sure that's a puzzle too!" replied Kennedy. "There was money on the car—the poor lady had drawn it at the bank that morning, and carried it in her reticule—but we found the reticule wide open, and not a pound note was stolen. It wasn't theft the villains were after, that's certain. It's more likely that they wanted to be revenged

on the poor lady for some wrong she's done them."

The eyes of the two men met, and the same thought seemed to pass through their minds simultaneously.

"You don't mean that!" said the priest.

"I do, your reverence," answered the officer. "There was only one man in the county who bore Miss Power any ill-will, and from information received I think that man is at the bottom of it all."

As Kennedy spoke, the sharp clang of horses' hoofs resounded on the pavement, and a man, mounted on a powerful mare, galloped into the inn yard. He was a slight yet powerfully - built man or about thirty, dressed in a tight-fitting riding coat, hunting-breeches, and top-boots. His short and curly

black hair and small black moustache contrasted strangely with his clear-cut and finely-moulded features, which were ghastly pale.

"Captain Kennedy!" he cried, leaping from his horse, and throwing the bridle to a groom.

"Here, sir," replied the Captain, adding in a low voice to the priest, "Mr. Langford is almost out of his wits over the affair. Poor gentleman! It's him that offers the reward of a hundred pounds."

The new-comer approached, and, seeing the priest, took his hand and wrung it silently. His manner was full of deep emotion and agitation.

"Well?" he asked, eagerly, turning to the Captain.

"There's nothing new, sir, I'm sorry to say."

"I've been over to the barracks again, and questioned Jim Feeny.

He contradicts himself at every word. Last night he said that only two men attacked the car, now he thinks there were half a dozen."

"He hasn't rightly come to his senses yet," observed Kennedy. "He'll sober down before the formal inquiry."

"Do you think he's to be trusted?" said Langford. "He may be in league with the scoundrels."

"I'm sure he's not, sir. Jim's a decent boy, and was a great favourite with his mistress. We'll have to go further afield for the men we're after."

Langford's black eyes flashed, and his lips were set tight together as he cried:

"We'll find them if we search the world!"

"Don't you suspect anybody

yourself, sir?" said Kennedy, with a meaning glance at Father John.

"Suspect? I?" cried Langford. "I know no one who would have lifted a finger against that angel."

"Think again, sir," persisted the officer. "Remember, it isn't the first time that Miss Power's person has been threatened, and on a former occasion, though she knew her assailant, she wouldn't say a word to convict him."

"The blessing of all the saints upon her!" murmured the priest. "Her heart was too kindly."

Langford seemed to reflect, fixing his eyes on the ground and tapping his boot nervously with his riding-whip; then, looking up, he suddenly exclaimed:

"You mean that blackguard cousin of hers, Patrick Blake?"

Kennedy nodded, and the other continued :

"It can't be ! I won't believe it ! I know the fellow's a drunkard and a blackguard, but after all, he's a gentleman, and her own kith and kin."

Kennedy could not repress a smile.

"That's just it, sir, as I was explaining to his reverence. If Miss Power hadn't inherited the estates under her aunt's will, Patrick Blake would have been the heir, and if Miss Power dies intestate, as they call it, he inherits after all. Then, just recall what took place after the poor lady came to live at the castle. You weren't the only one, sir (forgive me for saying it), who thought her worth the winning. Patrick Blake began by cursing and threatening the lady who displaced

him, and ended by hanging after and wanting to make her his wife. She sent him to the rightabout, as he deserved. After that, she was attacked when riding on horseback, and had to ask for police protection. She knew well enough who was guilty, but she held her tongue, because she was kind-hearted and he was her kinsman. The second time, when she thought herself safe close to her own house, a blackguard molested her, and you yourself saved her. Put this and that together, Mr. Langford, and you'll see we're not far wrong. At any rate, I'm going over with my man to Blake's place this morning, and if the fellow can't give a right account of himself, we'll have him safe under lock and bolt before night."

As the officer spoke, Langford

listened with intense interest, uttering from time to time a nervous exclamation, as the force of Kennedy's arguments seemed to dawn upon him.

"It looks black," he muttered. "You say you are going there now?"

"As soon as the horses have had a feed."

"Then I'll ride over with you, and if it is as you say——"

He paused, clutching his riding whip, and his eyes flashed dangerously; then as Kennedy walked away to give his orders, he turned to the priest with a look so forlorn, so despairing, that the good father's heart was stirred to the depths.

"God comfort you, sir!" said Father John. "It's you that loved her as the apple of your eye, and

it's myself that hoped to spake the holy words that would have made you man and wife."

"I had no chance that way," replied the young man, sadly. "I had nothing to offer her but an old name and barren acres. But you're right, I loved her with all my heart and soul."

Half an hour later the car, containing Captain Kennedy and his armed police, was driving rapidly northward, in the direction of Newport, followed by another car, on which was seated the portly frame of Father John O'Donnell. Just before they started Langford had galloped away in the same direction.

The traveller who is acquainted with the desolate scenery of Clew Bay, knows how sad and dreary are its prospects, though for the

lover of wild landscape they possess a beauty of their own. On the afternoon of which we are writing, there was little to brighten or animate the scene. Thick clouds were drifting from the Atlantic and clustering in grey vapour round the distant mountains of Mulrany and Achill, and inland, a drizzly rain was falling from the grey and sunless sky. On either side of the road pursued by Langford stretched barren bogs and watery pastures, divided into sections by grey stone walls, with here and there a glimpse of a lonely homestead and a clump of leafless trees.

Presently Langford reined in his horse, and suffered it to walk, while he sat in the saddle, lost in gloomy meditation. In this fashion he pursued his solitary way for several miles, until he saw in the

distance the roofs and chimneys of the little town of Newport. He then stopped his horse and, after a moment's reflection, turned into a narrow by-road which led to the left, in the direction of the sea.

Urging his horse into a trot, he proceeded rapidly for about a mile, when the road ended in a broken stone wall. Leaping the wall, he found himself in a meadow of thick coarse grass, at the further extremity of which, facing the sea, was a house built of white stone—a large and lonely house, much stained and damaged by wind and weather, but having the appearance of having been at some distant period a fine mansion. Attached to it were walled gardens and a large orchard full of trees, which yielded little fruit.

This was Langford house, where the family of Langford had dwelt

for generations, and where he, a bachelor, and the last of his line, still resided.

A solitary place, far removed from any human abode. Although there was room there for a large establishment (as the auctioneers express it), everything was disordered, dilapidated, and tumble-down. The house itself faced a weedy lawn, at the bottom of which was a stone wall, and beyond the wall stretched green saltings, and salt pools, covered at high tide by the sea.

Not a human creature was visible as Langford rode round to the front door, but the sound of his horses' hoofs was heard within the house, for an upper window opened, and a face looked out—the face of an old woman.

"Any news, Nannie?" he asked, looking up.

"None, your honour," said the woman.

"Where's Michael?"

"Sure, he's here. Will I bid him come down and take your honour's horse?"

"No; I'm going on beyon Newport, to meet the police."

"There's no tidings of the poor young lady?"

"None."

"Rest her sowl in glory, they'll be missing her sorely yonder at the Castle."

"If the police come here, tell them I've ridden on to Patrick Blake's. You understand?"

"Yes, your honour."

He turned his horse's head and moved slowly away, but, pausing at the side of the house, he gazed quietly at the dismal saltings and distant sea.

"Poor Catherine!" he muttered. "She was right, after all, to turn away from such a house as this. What a fool and a madman I have been!"

A little later he rode into the town of Newport, and paused a moment opposite the hotel, where a group of ragged gossips was collected.

"Has Captain Kennedy passed through the town?" he asked.

"No, your honour," answered a man, touching his forelock.

He pricked his horse with his spurs, and trotted on, while the group behind him uttered a simultaneous wail of sympathy.

"Poor gintleman! He looks heartbroken, and shmall wonder," said the man who had answered his question. "They're saying the poor lady is lying kilt at the bottom of the say."

CHAPTER II.

UST outside Newport the highway divides into two roads, one winding almost due west along the borders of Clew Bay, the other turning northwards among the mountains of Mayo. Langford took the latter, which followed the sides of a shallow river, brawling, brown with mud and peat moss, and swollen by the recent floods. Three Irish miles away, on the roadside and facing the river, was a

two-storied dwelling roofed with slate, and surrounded with farm buildings and cattle sheds. Over the door of this house was exhibited the legend, "John Carey, licensed to sell spirits and tobacco," and here, as a sort of permanent lodger, resided Mr. Patrick Blake, the man whom Langford was seeking.

In front of the house, and behind it rose the steep and barren mountains, feathered on the lower slopes with stunted heather and grass, but for the most part black, shiny, and bare. Between them, rushing past the high road, was the river.

Langford rode slowly up to the inn. A savage-looking man, dressed in the usual long tail coat, knee breeches, and narrow-brimmed high hat, sat on a wooden seat near the door, splicing a broken salmon-

rod. He looked up with a scowl as the horseman approached, and then, recognising him, touched his hat. Langford leapt from the saddle.

"Look after the mare, Timlin," he said. "I want to speak to Mr. Blake, is he at home?"

"He's in there, your honour," replied the man, holding his horse by the bridle, and jerking his thumb towards the house. "There's company wid him from Castlebar."

Langford entered the inn and found himself in a large kitchen, where an elderly woman was bending over an iron pot. Beyond the kitchen was a closed door, through which came the sound of men's voices. Without a word to the woman, who seemed startled by his appearance, Langford strode across the floor, opened the closed door, and, standing on the threshold

gazed with an angry scowl on the room within.

It was a small, low-roofed tap-room, with one window looking on the rear of the house. Its only furniture was a long wooden table and several forms. Seated at the table were four men, with a whisky bottle and glasses before them, playing cards.

Two of these men were peasants closely resembling the man whom Langford met at the door; savage-looking, unkempt fellows, with square jaws and lowering eyes. The third man was a little thick-set person, dressed in shabby broad-cloth, and with a face full of the cunning of his class, for he was one Peter Linnie, a small pettifogging solicitor from Castlebar. The fourth man, on whom Langford fixed his eyes, was different in every respect from his companions.

He could not have been more than five and twenty years of age, and he looked even younger. His hair was sandy yellow, his complexion white and bloodless, his eyes large and blue, with dark rings around them, suggestive of dissipation. A stubby red moustache covered his upper lip; the underlip was thick and sensual.

He was leaning on the table holding his cards, with a low-crowned hat thrust on the back of his head, and a short pipe held between his teeth. Coarse and reckless as he seemed, there was something in his manner and demeanour which showed him to be superior to his surroundings, and his dress, a knickerbocker suit of light tweed, with a collarless flannel shirt thrown open at the throat, and cut like the dress of a gentleman.

This was Patrick Blake, one of the Blakes of Ballyveeny, a very old Mayo family.

As Langford appeared, he looked up with an angry exclamation.

"Monomondianol!" he cried. "Who's this that comes into the society of gentlemen without knocking and asking leave? O, it's you, is it, Mr. Philip Langford," he continued, with a sarcastic grin; "and may I ask what the devil brings you so far away from Castle Craig?"

"I've come to look for you," answered Langford, sternly, "and to talk to you, if you're sober enough to listen."

Blake flung down his cards with an oath, and, springing to his feet, seized the whisky bottle as if about to hurl it at the other's head; but Linnie the lawyer seized his arm

and whispered in his ear. He nodded and laughed tipsily, and sank back into his chair.

"All right," he said. "Come in, Langford! If you've brought us any news of my cousin Kate, we're at you're service."

Langford walked into the room and stood at the end of the table, confronting the group.

"You know well I've brought no news. I've come to seek it, and I warn you——"

"Have a drink," cried the young man, insolently. "Here, Carey, bring in another bottle of Jamieson, and chalk it up to yours truly."

As he spoke another person appeared upon the scene—a girl of about twenty, dressed in short gown and petticoat of a peasant woman, and barefooted. She was singularly handsome, with bright golden hair,

pale complexion, and large grey eyes; but her expression was bold and reckless, that of a woman who had lost the freshness and innocence or youth.

"Sorra drop more you'll have this morning," said the girl. "You're drunk enough already."

"Hould your tongue, Mary!" cried one of the men, John Carey, the landlord of the inn.

"And I'll not hould my tongue, father, so long as I see Mr. Patrick drinking his sinse away and you looking on," cried the girl, leaning against the lintel of the door and folding her arms defiantly. "Spake to the gintleman civilly, Mr. Patrick. Maybe he's here for your good."

Blake laughed loudly, and winked at the lawyer.

"Sit down, Mary acushla, and

don't be a fool!" he said; then, squaring his chin, and looking at Langford, "Well, fire away! What is it?"

"In the first place," said Langford, "I warn you that Captain Kennedy and the police are after you and will be here immediately."

A murmur ran round the room.

"So that's it, is it?" cried Blake. "It was mighty polite of you to come and tell me. And what may the police want with me, may I ask?"

"You are suspected, rightly or wrongly, of having something to do with the disappearance of your cousin, Miss Catherine Power. It is well known that you attacked her on a former occasion, and that you've more than once threatened her life."

The young man's face went

white with rage and terror, and he uttered a savage oath.

"Take care what you say, Mr. Langford," said the lawyer. "Mr. Blake is my client, and your language is actionable."

"He knows that I speak the truth," answered Langford, sternly.

"I know this, Philip Langford," said Blake, leaning over the table and looking fiercely into his face, "that you're what you always have been, a meddler and a fool. Put that in your pipe and smoke it! As for my cousin, she got what she deserves, since she came between me and my birthright! Yes—by ——, my birthright! And if she's dead, as they say, what then? The more fool she! I offered to make her Mrs. Blake, and to share the estates with her, and she showed me the door. Then you came

creeping after her, bad luck to you, but more power to her, she sent you to the rightabout after me! She'd sense enough for that, any way!"

Throughout this tirade, Langford retained his self-control, but his face grew paler and there was a dangerous look in his dark eyes.

He was about to speak again, when the tramp of feet was heard in the kitchen, and Captain Kennedy, followed by two policemen carrying their muskets, entered the room. A cry went up from the men, but Mary Carey remained silent, still leaning against the lintel of the door, and watching the face of Patrick Blake.

"You're here before us, Mr. Langford," said Kennedy. "Well, what has Mr. Blake to say for himself?"

"You'd better question him," answered Langford, quietly.

"Clear the room, John Carey," said Kennedy to the landlord, "and take your daughter with you. Be handy, though, for I may want you."

"I shall remain with my client," said the lawyer. "You know me, Captain Kennedy—Peter Linnie, attorney, of Castlebar."

"Yes, I know you well enough," answered the officer with a shrug of the shoulders.

The men had slunk out of the room, but the girl remained moveless.

"Now, then, my girl," said Kennedy, "you can't stop here. Out you go!"

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, raising her voice. "Are you going to arrest him, a gintleman born?"

"That's our business."

"No, it's mine! I dare ye to lay a finger on him, and I'll stay where I am!"

Kennedy signalled to the constables, who were about to eject the girl by gentle force, when Father John O'Donnell entered the room, and fixing his eyes upon her, cried—

"Is it you, Mary Carey, that would come between a murderer and the law? Down on your knees, woman, and thank the Lord ye're not whipt through County Mayo at the cart's tail, as they used to whip women of your kind long ago. I've spoken to your priest, and he tells me that 'tis a year now since ye came to confession, and by the same token, it's many an ugly sin ye have to hide."

"Get out, Mary," exclaimed

Blake. "It's all right! I'll talk to them!"

More cowed by the priest's invective than by the armed forces of the law, Mary retreated, saying as she went—

"Tell them nothing, Mr. Patrick! I'd let the tongue blister in my mouth before I'd spake a word!"

The constables closed the door and stood guarding it.

"Now, then, Mr. Blake," said Kennedy, sitting down, "I want to ask you a few questions. If you can answer them satisfactorily, so much the better for you, but I warn you, in the first place, that anything you say will be used against you."

"I've nothing to say except one thing," answered Blake.

"Well?"

"That I'll be even before long

with him that gave information against me;" and he glared fiercely at Langford.

Kennedy smiled.

"You're wrong there, my man. Mr. Langford has nothing to do with the matter. We've had an eye on your doings for a long time, and needed no informer to tell us what you were."

"All the same, I'll be even with him," muttered Blake.

"Now, then, where were you yesterday?"

"Here, and down along the river, salmon fishing," replied Blake, sullenly.

"All day?"

"All day. Michael Conolly was with me, you can ask him."

Kennedy made an entry in his note-book.

"Just before sunset, Miss Power

left Newport on her way to Ballyveeny. About seven o'clock, according to the car-driver's evidence, she was passing the stone bridge, when armed men attacked the car. They must have been waiting there some hours, for we found empty whisky bottles on the grass below the bridge."

"What's all this to me?" demanded Blake.

"You'll see. Where were you between six and seven?"

"Drinking in this room with Michael Conolly and John Carey. If you'll ask them, they'll tell you I was blind drunk. Mary Carey can tell you the same."

Kennedy looked at Langford, who shrugged his shoulders, but the priest, who had been listening excitedly to the conversation, now interposed.

"Patrick Blake, as you've a soul to be saved, speak the truth! Down on your knees, and ask forgiveness of the God you've offended. Our hearts are aching—set them at rest! What have ye done with the poor young lady? Tell the truth, and save your soul! It's I myself will plead for mercy for ye, if you really and truly repent, and make confession."

"I've nothing to confess," snarled Blake, "so you only waste your breath."

"Three months ago, Miss Power was attacked by a masked man," said Kennedy, quietly. "She escaped, leaving the mark of her riding-whip upon his face. I had a warrant to arrest you then, and I've got it in my pocket."

"Why didn't you execute it?" demanded the young man, with a

sneer; but although his manner remained full of bravado, he was clearly cowed by the officer's statement.

"Because Miss Power 'herself entreated us to pass the matter over. She had recognised her assailant, but didn't wish to have him punished."

"That was very kind of her," said Blake, leering at the attorney. "Maybe she'd her reasons."

"Silence!" exclaimed Father O'Donnell. "Speak of that angel with respect, or my stick and your skull will be better acquainted!"

"Wheesht, your reverence!" said Kennedy. "Now, Mr. Blake, listen to me. Miss Power has disappeared, and it is evident she has met with foul play. The only man who ever threatened her with violence, and the man who at least

on one occasion actually attacked her, is the man who had the greatest interest in her death. That man is yourself. Under these circumstances, I'm going to arrest you."

Blake sprang up and rushed to the window.

"You'd better take it easy," said the officer, smiling, while the heads of two more policemen appeared outside. "Shall I handcuff you, or will you come civilly, like a gentleman as you are."

Blake decided to come civilly, and was led from the room in the custody of the two constables. As he swaggered past Langford, he hissed between his teeth—

"—— you! Don't forget what I've promised you."

One by one the men were called in and questioned. They all supported Blake's statement, that he

had spent the previous day in their neighbourhood, fishing in the river and drinking at the inn.

"Do you think they are speaking the truth?" asked Langford, nervously.

"No, sir," answered Kennedy. "I'm sure they're lying. They're Blake's creatures, and, in my opinion, his accomplices. John Carey is the greatest scoundrel unhung, and Conolly is not much better. Now we'll have in the girl, and see if we can get anything out of her."

With set teeth and flashing eyes, Mary Carey bounded into the room, and folding her arms defiantly faced the officer. Even then she looked singularly handsome.

"Now, Mary machree," said Kennedy, good-humouredly, "I'm sure you're a sensible girl and don't

want to cause trouble. Perhaps you don't quite realise yet that this may be a hanging business, and I shouldn't like to think such a pretty colleen as you was concerned in it. I know you're very fond of Mr. Blake, of course, and it's natural enough, for he's a fine, bold, upstanding gentleman, but——"

"Who told you I was fond of him?" asked the girl, with a toss of the head.

"Sure, we all know it, darling, and we don't blame you. But come now, tell the truth and shame the devil, like an honest colleen, as I'm sure you are."

"I'll tell you nothing," said Mary, setting her lips together.

"Don't say that now, for it's unworthy of you. Some day you'll be getting married, and I'd like to dance at your wedding."

She gave a short, mocking laugh.

"There's more than me that thought of marryin', maybe," she said, "and yet it didn't come off."

"Meaning Miss Power?" asked the Captain. "Well, now, Mary, they're saying that young Mr. Blake was mad with love for her, and clean lost his head when she refused to be his wife."

"He never wanted her," said Mary, flushing angrily. "If he ever went afther her at all at all, it was because he wanted her money, which was his by rights."

"And when he couldn't get either the lady or the money, he swore to be revenged?" observed Kennedy.

"I don't know what that is," returned Mary. "All I know is that she's got what she worked for, and won't cause any more trouble."

"But, come now," said Kennedy, persuasively, "isn't it a puzzle what has happened to her? Not a trace of her can we find, though we've dragged the river from the bridge down to the sea."

"Then ye'd better drag the say itself," cried the girl with a laugh. "Maybe it's there ye'll find her."

Langford trembled, and a horrified exclamation escaped from the priest, but Kennedy remained quite cool.

"Mr. Blake tells me he was here all yesterday, and all last night," he said.

"If Mr. Blake says that same it's true."

"Was he in your company?"

"You'd better ask him," was the curt answer.

"Mind what you're saying," said the officer, with sudden sternness. "If you're not careful you may put

the rope round your lover's neck, for there's been murder done, and it's a hanging business."

Not the least disconcerted by the statement, Mary looked full in the officer's face and made this significant reply—

"Sure, how can there be murder when ye can't prove that anybody's kilt. When ye find the body 'twill be time to talk." And she walked coolly out of the room.

Kennedy looked perplexed.

"You heard that?" he said, turning to Langford, "I'm sure now that that girl knows everything, but torture itself would never get a word out of her. I can't arrest her on mere suspicion, but I shall keep a sharp eye on her while Blake is in custody."

They found Blake outside the inn, guarded by the police. He

had regained all his coolness, and was exchanging rough jests with his captors and with his savage acquaintances who clustered near the door.

"Keep your heart up, Mr. Patrick!" cried Carey, as the prisoner took his place on the car. "Sure we'll all stand by you."

Blake nodded and beckoned to Mary, who stood at the inn door, her lips trembling and her eyes full of tears. She ran up to the car, holding out her hands.

"Mind what I told you!" said Blake, mysteriously.

The girl nodded and wrung his hand.

The police car drove off amidst dead silence, but when Langford mounted his horse to follow there was a general groan.

"The blackguards!" cried Father John, standing up on his car and

shaking his fist. "Never heed them, sir. There's a rope round the neck of every one of them."

As he spoke the driver cracked his whip and the horse started off, nearly projecting the priest into the road, but while the group at the inn door laughed derisively he clung to the rail and seated himself with as much dignity as was possible under the circumstances.

As Langford prepared to follow Mary Carey ran up to his horse's side and placed her hand upon the bridle.

"Bad luck to ye for this day's work!" she said. "It's me and mine that will remember it, even if Mr. Patrick forgets!"

Scarcely raising his eyes he shook the bridle from her hand and rode slowly away, the very incarnation of misery and despair.

CHAPTER III.

IT is necessary, now, to trace the course of certain extraordinary events, which had taken place previously to the final disappearance of the heroine of this true story.

Miss Catherine Power was the most popular lady in the whole of the county of Mayo. She possessed three stepping stones to popularity: she

was beautiful, wealthy, and unmarried.

When it was rumoured that she was coming to Newport to take possession of the property which had been most unexpectedly left to her, it was generally predicted that the local gentry would receive her with open arms. It was something, indeed, in that wild district, to be the lucky possessor of Castle Craig, with a rent roll of several thousands a year. But when the young lady appeared personally upon the scene the money became a secondary consideration altogether. It had been expected, yet not one could tell exactly why, that the unknown heiress would be a mature lady of goodly proportions, with a keen eye, an aggressive nose, and a purse-proud, haughty air. Miss Power, however, was but three

and twenty years of age, had a tall, slim figure, a finely formed head and face, and the grace of a lady to the manner born. Her hair was jet black, her skin fair as a lily, her eyebrows dark, and her eyes of a deep violet blue.

Whether she smiled or frowned, or gazed with that dreamy look which her face so often wore, Catherine Power never for a moment lost the fatal power of fascination which was destined to prove her bane.

By one and all this power of hers was felt. The men might shrug their shoulders at the thought of meeting the popular heiress of Castle Craig, the angry mammas might sneer, the jealous maidens rail, but once they were introduced into the lady's presence they succumbed as all before had done,

and laid their allegiance at her feet. In a word, she came like a queen to her own, and reigned absolute.

In addition to her wealth, her beauty, and her single blessedness, she had two other supreme gifts to win the hearts of the Irish gentry—she danced like a sylph, and she sat her horse like an angel.

Little or nothing was known of her antecedents, except that she had been brought up in England, where her parents had died, leaving her a small fortune, quite enough for a single young lady to subsist upon. Then came the announcement of her accession to the Mayo estates, which was closely followed by her appearance at Castle Craig, where for many days she kept open house, receiving the calls and congratulations of the gentry and tenantry.

Before long the whole of the

county was ringing with the echoes of her name, and the local newspapers thought it their duty to chronicle her comings and goings, as if she were an offshoot of royalty. Suitors swarmed about her like bees about a sugar bowl, but the dreamy young lady, conscious of her worth, merely smiled to herself and dismissed them one and all with a polite but decided "no."

Whether or not society was distasteful to her no one could tell; but the fact remains that she showed a curious love of solitude, and was in the habit of taking lonely walks, rides, and drives in the most dreary parts in the district.

Her groom was by no means astonished, therefore, when, one dark autumn day, Miss Power ordered her favourite horse to be saddled, and cantered away from

the Castle without escort of any kind. She felt in the mood for a good long ride that day; so she galloped to Westport, a distance of fifteen miles, and having executed some commissions, started again for home.

It was a fresh though cloudy afternoon, the wind was blowing briskly from the sea, and as the horse's hoofs clattered on the road the eyes of the fair rider sparkled, her cheeks flushed, and her lips parted to drink in the breath of the salt bracing air. When she had covered some twelve miles of the homeward way, and had reached the outskirts of the Castle Wood, she reined in her steaming horse and trotted along a bridle path which skirted the woods, and cut off two miles of the road.

She had been trotting thus for

about ten minutes when she heard a rustling among the trees, and a man dressed as a peasant, but wearing a crape mask, rushed from the shelter of the woods and seized her bridle rein.

The horse reared furiously, but the lady kept her seat, and raising her riding whip brought it down sharply right across the ruffian's face. At this unexpected attack he fell back, while Miss Power, applying both spur and whip to her frightened horse, made him bound forward and gallop furiously in the direction of the Castle.

When Miss Power dismounted at her own door her face was pale, and her fair form was still trembling from the fright of the recent adventure, but alighting from her horse she handed the reins to the groom and said quietly:

"Leave the stabling of Wildfire to some one else to-night, Cormick; I want you to ride over to Mulrany. Make haste, and when you are ready, send in for a note from me."

Then she entered the house, and going direct to her boudoir sat down and wrote as follows:

"To Sergeant Flynn,—Kindly send me at once an armed patrol. I want the Castle to be guarded night and day—at least for a time. As I was riding to-day I was molested by a peasant in a crape mask who seized my horse's bridle. It will be as well for me, therefore, to have police protection. I dine this evening at Cladich Castle, and should like to be attended.

"CATHERINE POWER."

Having sent this letter down to her groom the lady entered her

drawing-room and played absently on the piano. An hour later she went to her dressing-room to put herself under the hands of her maid. As she sat before the great cheval glass, apparently gazing at her own image and smiling at what she saw, she was in reality gazing at the mysterious figure which had stopped her on the road, and smiling at the fright which it had given her.

"Heigho," she thought, "it seems to me that money does not bring much happiness. The life of an heiress is devoted to warding off robbery in one shape or another. They are all thieves, only they carry on their trade in a different fashion. Most of them would marry me first and rob me afterwards, but this poor fool was evidently under the impression

that I carried my fortune in my pocket, and was determined to dispossess me of it at one fell blow. I did well, I think, to send for the police. The ruffian, whoever he is, will be frightened at any rate."

While she was musing thus, her maid's hands were busy. There was to be a big dance that night at Lord Portaclare's place, a fine old mansion situated midway between Newport and Westport, and Miss Power was to be the belle of the evening. And a belle indeed she seemed when her toilette was completed. She wore a ball dress of white satin, with diamonds in her hair, red roses on her bosom, and bracelets of gold filagree on her shapely arms.

There was a knock at the door, and a voice said :

"Captain Kennedy is below, miss, waiting to see you."

She gave one glance at herself in the glass, sprinkled some scent upon her lace handkerchief, and descended to the drawing-room, where she found the polite captain.

"I was at the barracks when your note arrived, Miss Power, so I thought I'd come over myself. I've brought two of the constabulary along with me."

"Thank you, Captain Kennedy."

"This is a strange affair entirely," continued the officer. "Have you any idea who it was that attacked you?"

"Not the slightest," answered the lady with a smile.

"Do you think he was a common robber?"

"It certainly looked like it."

"It was lucky you kept your

presence of mind, miss," said Kennedy, with an admiring look. "How was it you escaped scot free?"

"Well, the whole affair was so sudden that I hardly know what happened. The moment the man seized my bridle, Wildfire reared, and then, instinctively, I laid my whip across the man's cheek, and before he could recover himself I was off and away."

The inspector looked puzzled and very serious.

"I'd like to ask you one question, Miss Power," he said, after a pause. "Have you ever been threatened?"

She looked uneasy, but answered without hesitation—

"Yes, once."

"Do you know who threatened you?"

"Perfectly, but I would rather not mention his name at present."

"As you please, miss," said Kennedy, a little surprised, "only if you gave us some clue we shouldn't be working quite so much in the dark."

"I have particular reasons for saying nothing at present," remarked Miss Power, "only I think it prudent to protect myself from any attacks in the future."

When Catherine descended the stairs she found her carriage, with a mounted policeman on either side of it awaiting her at the door. Thus escorted, she started for Cladich Castle.

When the lady arrived at her destination escorted in so unusual a manner everybody was on tenterhooks to know what it all meant. Not a whisper of the adventure had as yet got abroad, but the groom had dropped a word to the foot-

man, the footman to the coachman, and that individual made himself during the evening an object of very considerable interest in the kitchen of the Castle.

Miss Power herself carried the news to the ball-room, where a large and gallant company was assembled. During the evening the adventure was liberally discussed, but the heroine made light of it and seemed in the highest of spirits. After one of the waltzes in which he had been her happy partner, Mr. Philip Langford, a friend and neighbour, found himself alone with Miss Power.

"My dear Miss Power," said he, as the two paced up and down among the exotics, "you really want some one to protect you from this sort of thing."

"Of course," returned Catherine,

archly, "and I have appointed some one. Did I not arrive here attended by an escort of police?"

The gentleman coloured and bit his lip. In point of fact he had long been dancing attendance on the lady of the Castle, and to all outward appearance he was a most eligible match. He was fairly young and passably handsome, could sit a horse well in the hunting field, and though somewhat moody and taciturn in general, was sweetness itself to those he liked. Unfortunately he was poor, all his possessions being a tumbledown mansion and about three or four hundred a year. But what he lacked in money he made up for in descent. His ancestors counted much further back than he could trace at all, but he knew for certain and he very often boasted that one of them

was on the ship which brought over Grana O'Mailley to the English court. Despite all this, and although she had often found herself looking at his handsome face and manly figure with some degree of admiration, Catherine could never bring herself to look with any favour upon his suit.

"The fact is," she said to herself over and over again, "I like them all so much that I cannot choose one. Now if they would only leave marrying alone, and be content to be my friends, how much nicer it would be."

Having made that sly remark about the police, Catherine peeped into her companion's face and saw how darkly it was clouded.

"What's the matter?" she said, softly. "Are you angry?"

"Angry? what right have I to

be angry? I am only anxious on your account."

"Once warned, twice armed!" cried Catherine, smiling. "Captain Kennedy is awfully nice, and would give me a whole regiment of constabulary if I asked him."

Then seeing that his face was still shadowed, she added sweetly:

"Please forgive me, Mr. Langford, and let us be friends. I did not mean any offence, I assure you!"

In a moment the young man's face turned smilingly to hers: he gazed upon her with a look which made her blush and turn her head away.

"Catherine," he said, passionately, "if you want to please me you know the way. You have but to give me the right to protect you!"

"Ah, but I cannot do that," returned Catherine, and with that will-o'-the-wisp friendship always blinding her eyes, she clung to his arm when she should never have stayed with him at all. Thus it was that the two continued to pace up and down among the shrubs and flowers; the man making the best of his time to urge his suit, the girl listening half-pleased, half-sorry, until at length she was startled from her dream by the fierce scrutiny of a pair of eyes which were watching her from the door.

"Why, there is my cousin!" she cried, quitting the side of her astonished companion. "How do you do, Mr. Blake," she continued, as she paused before him, holding forth her hand, "this is the first I have seen of you this evening. The fact is I have been so besieged with

curious people anxious to obtain some description of the person who tried to rob me on the road that—that——"

She faltered and turned pale, for as she spoke her eyes had wandered carelessly over the countenance of her *vis-à-vis*. His pale face was disfigured by a livid mark which stretched from forehead to cheek, and one eye was swollen as if by a sharp blow.

CHAPTER IV.

OUNG Patrick Blake, known to his intimate acquaintances as "the squireen," had neither house nor lands, though he belonged by right of birth to an old county family. In spite of his poverty, he had great expectations, for his uncle, Sir William Craig, of Craig Castle, had no issue, and young Patrick

was the next of kin. The property, however was not entailed, and it was entirely in Sir William's discretion how it should be disposed of.

During his uncle's lifetime Patrick paid assiduous court to the old man, and received in return a modest allowance, which he dissipated freely among his companions. From childhood upward he had been a black sheep, caring little for decent society and spending his time in the company of his inferiors; but he was a daring rider, a good shot, and he could tie a fly or play a salmon with any man in Mayo. His escapades, which would have shocked most people, only amused Sir William.

"Pat is a wild young devil," he would say to his wife, "but so was I myself at his age: Some day he'll marry and sober down."

Before the young man could do either, the old gentleman died, leaving everything he possessed to his wife, except a miserable hundred a year, which was assigned to his "beloved nephew," Patrick Blake.

Young Patrick cursed and raged for a time, but he had sense enough left to transfer his court to the widow, whom he invariably described as "the old woman." He went with her to church (she was a Protestant), carried her prayer-book, and posed as a young saint, only escaping from time to time to more congenial society, in which he could drink and swear comfortably, and curse his bad luck.

Things were going on very well from his point of view—that is, the old lady was in very delicate health and likely to follow her lord and master, after having made a will

in her nephew's favour—when a serious scandal, in which a young peasant girl was concerned, opened Lady Craig's eyes to the true character of her scapegrace nephew. She held her tongue, altered her will, and died peaceably, leaving the castle and the estates to a niece of her own, Miss Catherine Power.

When the will was read, young Patrick used language which is not generally popular in polite circles, cursed "the old woman," and expressed a hope that she was enjoying a warmer climate, and riding off to John Carey's inn, remained for a whole fortnight there in a state of savage drunkenness.

In the meantime Miss Power arrived and took up her residence at the Castle, and she had hardly been twenty-four hours there when the

story of the dispossessed heir was related to her. It aroused all her womanly pity, and her immediate thought was, "how can I make amends?"

She waited for a little time, thinking that her cousin might call. He made no sign.

She ordered her horse and rode over to the inn where he had taken up his quarters, thinking perhaps to get a glimpse of him. He heard of her coming, and kept out of the way.

Then she sent him a *petit mot*, which was carried by her groom.

"My dear Cousin,—I should very much like to shake hands with you, if you have no objection. Will you come and take lunch with me some day soon?

"Yours very truly,

"Catherine Power."

The young man tore up the letter.

The next day he was in Castlebar, where he had a long talk with Peter Linnie. That worthy gave him very sensible advice, pointing out to him that in all possibility he was missing a great chance. Why shouldn't he capture the heiress and her money by honourable marriage, and so make odd things even?

"She's a handsome woman," said the lawyer, "and all the men are after her. Spake up to her like a gentleman, and I'll lay odds on she'll have you."

The result of this advice was that Blake dressed himself in his best, stuck a flower in his coat, mounted his horse, and rode off to Castle Craig. Thus smartened up, he was a strapping young fellow, handsome enough to catch any woman's eye.

He was shown up into the drawing-room, where he waited scowling and trembling, for he was not much used to fine society. A few minutes later, a beautiful young woman, with a smile like May morning, entered and made him welcome, greeting him like an old friend. Being in her heart very sorry for him, she was full of sympathy and effusion, and he went away strongly convinced that she would be an easy conquest.

For a little time after that, Blake was a constant visitor at the Castle, and being of good family he had no difficulty in getting invitations to other county houses where Catherine was a frequent guest. He neglected his wild companions, paid strict attention to his wardrobe, and altogether seemed a reformed character. His cousin gave him every

encouragement. He rode with her, danced with her, and was constantly near her.

"She's yours for the asking," said Peter Linnie, when the squireen reported progress.

Blake himself was not so sure. He had many rivals, some young like himself, others of maturer age and ampler fortune, and Catherine was civil to them all. The man he thought most dangerous was Philip Langford, who was certainly a great favourite with his cousin.

He had almost forgotten the money prize, in the personal fascination of the heiress. Her bold, frank manners, just touched with feminine tenderness, made havoc with his impetuous heart. He was tormented with jealousy, whenever another man approached her, and

Catherine being a very woman, loved to fan the flame.

At last, one day, when they were riding side by side through the woods, he spoke out.

"I've been thinking, Kate," he began.

"Indeed, cousin?" said Catherine, smiling. "Isn't that something unusual?"

"I've been thinking that this sort of nonsense can't go on for ever. You waltzed with that fellow Langford five times last night, and only gave me two square dances."

"Mr. Langford waltzes beautifully!" exclaimed Catherine.

"—— him!" muttered Blake flushing crimson, and scowling.

"If you use language like that, I shall gallop off and leave you," said the lady, urging her horse to a trot;

but her companion, reaching out his hand, seized her bridle, and brought her horse to a dead halt.

"Stop, I must speak to you," he cried. "It's been on my mind for a long time to tell you how much I love you. I do—you must have seen it. Now I'm your cousin, and all this place should have been mine, but that's all over now, Kate, and you're welcome to it all. It's you I want, and not the money, and if you'll have me, Kate——"

"So this is a proposal?" cried Catherine. "You mean, I suppose, that you want me to marry you?"

Blake replied by leaning from his saddle, and trying to take her in his arms. But she drew herself up, and waved him back.

"Cousin," she said, "I want you to do me a great favour.'

"Well?"

"Never speak of this again. If you do, we shall cease to be friends."

"You don't mean that?" he cried, angrily.

"I do mean it. There are two reasons, either of which should be sufficient. First reason, we are cousins, and I don't believe in the marriage of near relations; second reason, I like you very well as a relation, but should find you intolerable as a husband. I hope I'm not hurting your feelings, but in a case like this it's better to be quite frank."

He released his hold on her bridle, and she trotted on, leaving him transfixed. When she had gone about a hundred yards, she paused and beckoned. He remained stationary. She trotted back to him.

"Come, cousin," she said,

brightly, "let's shake hands and end the matter for ever. Surely we can still be friends?"

He waved her hand aside, and glared at her with blood-shot eyes. His face was livid, and his mouth worked convulsively.

"If I don't have you, no other man shall!" he said.

"What nonsense!"

"It isn't nonsense. I mean what I say."

"Then you are very impertinent," returned the beauty, with a toss of the head, "and you had better go back to Mary Carey!"

With this parting shot, she rode away for the second time, and never looked back till she disappeared.

Mad and furious, Blake again resorted to his adviser, Peter Linnie.

"It's as plain as a barn door!" said that luminary. "She has heard

about Carey's daughter, and she's jealous, that's all. It's a good sign that, not a bad one. You must stick to her like her shadow, and give her a hint that ye don't care a brass farthing for anybody but herself. Never say die, my boy, and you'll win her yet."

The young man acted on the advice so given. Instead of sulking and flying to drink as he had at first felt inclined to do, he turned up again as if nothing had occurred. Catherine received him in the same manner, and the breach seemed entirely healed.

A few days later, as they stood together one morning, in front of the Castle, Blake said quietly—

"You said something to me t'other day about Mary Carey. I hope you don't believe that scandal?"

She looked him quietly in the face, but made no reply.

"Because," he continued, "because if you do believe it——"

"Hush! There is Mr. Langford," she exclaimed, interrupting him, as Mr. Langford came strolling across the lawn.

The two men lunched with her that day, and we fear she played one off against the other.

They were a curious contrast—Blake, handsome, sullen, and savage, like a good-looking cub only half-tamed to good behaviour; Langford, with his calm, clear-cut face, his courteous smile, and his dark passionate eyes. When Catherine looked at the former, her expression was merry, kind, and almost material; when she turned her eyes on Langford the expression grew grave and dreamy.

Langford was the first to leave. When he had gone, Blake, who had taken rather too much wine, snarled savagely :

"I hate that fellow! He's as fly as a fox, and as cold-blooded as a stoat!"

"He is my very good friend," said Catherine, "and I must ask you not to abuse him."

"You mean your sweetheart!" cried Blake, forgetting himself in his fury of jealousy.

"I mean nothing of the kind, but even if it were so, it would be no concern of yours."

"Wouldn't it, by ——!" exclaimed the young man, utterly losing his self-control. "Remember what I told you."

Pale with indignation Catherine prepared to leave the room, but before she could do so Blake sprang up and closed the door.

"Once more I ask you, will you marry me?" he cried, facing her.

She looked him from head to foot with a gaze so cool, so contemptuous, that the hot blood mounted to his face. Then, without replying, she quietly touched the bell.

He came close to her, and seized her two hands in his.

"Kate!"

She tried to release herself, but he held her firmly looking into her face.

"Don't wake up the devil in me! Don't make me do what I might be sorry for! You've robbed me of my birthright—don't go further, and make me mad. As sure as you stand there, I mean to have you, and if I can't win you by fair means I'll try foul."

"You are not sober," she replied, haughtily, "and you talk to me as if I were the girl of some low inn."

Then releasing herself, as the servant entered the room, she said quietly—

"Tell the groom to bring round Mr. Blake's horse at once!"

The servant disappeared, while Blake stood like a man dazed, as indeed he was. Without looking towards him, Catherine sat down at the piano and began to play—lightly, carelessly, letting her fingers wander idly across the keys.

When she looked round Blake had disappeared.

A week passed, and there was no sign of him; a second week, and still no sign. She began to feel sorry, for though her heart was quite untouched, she couldn't help admitting to herself that she was partly to blame.

Then came the mysterious assault in the woods, which we have already

described, and Catherine's visit to Cladich Castle under escort of the police.

The moment she looked at her cousin, Catherine had no doubt whatever that she had discovered her assailant. Up to that moment, she had scarcely thought it possible that even Patrick Blake should have been guilty of such a *bêtise.*

Recovering herself in a moment, and forcing a smile, she said—

"Why haven't you been to see me? I have been expecting you every day."

The young man's face was a study. Shame, confusion, and a reckless audacity were all mingled there. He saw in a moment that his secret was discovered, but he did not seem to care. Answering the smile with one of ugly significance, and glancing at Langford, he replied—

"I thought, maybe, you might have pleasanter company," and then with a forced laugh, and a shrug of the shoulders, he strolled away into the ball-room.

The moment he had gone Catherine's self-possession left her. She trembled and seemed about to fall, when Langford stepped forward with an exclamation and supported her.

"What is it?" he cried, tenderly.

"Nothing, nothing," she murmured.

"That ruffian has insulted you!"

"Indeed, no," she said, gently. "For whatever has occurred, I am myself most to blame. But I am miserable, miserable! I wished to be friends with all the world, and I awaken only hatred in all I meet."

"Catherine," said Langford, "there is but one way out of all

your perplexity. I have told it before—let me repeat it now. I love you! I have loved you from the moment we first met! Become my wife!"

His arm still encircled her waist, and he drew her tenderly towards him. At first she seemed to yield, but it was only for a moment. Disengaging herself, she said quietly—

"I shall never marry. I love my liberty too well, and indeed, all that I have seen of men makes me more and more afraid. You say you love me. Others have said the same thing. It is friendship, true friendship that I need, not love."

In a moment her high spirits came back to her, and she added with a laugh—

"What a dreadful thing it is to

be a woman, especially in Ireland, where men are only half civilised! Pray, take me back to the ball-room."

For several hours after she had gone to bed that night, Catherine lay awake thinking of Patrick Blake: when at length she fell asleep she dreamed of him, and in the morning when she awoke her brain was ringing with the echo of his threat: "If you won't have me, you shall never have any other man!"

The singularity of his manner puzzled her, so did the strange coincidence of the mark upon his cheek. That she herself had been the means of placing it there she did not for a moment doubt, and yet it certainly seemed very strange.

"After all," she said to herself, "I am glad I have made no one

but Captain Kennedy acquainted with the fact of my having struck the man. That part of the story I will continue to keep to myself."

She walked over to the window, and looked out. The country for miles around, lay buried deep in snowdrift. The little hamlets, with closed doors and windows, and snow-laden roofs, lay like black spots, on the vast waste of white.

Scarcely a soul was to be seen abroad, for already walking was dangerous, and still the snow was falling fast.

"I shall not be able to leave the house to-day," said Catherine to herself, and at the thought she did not feel altogether sorry. The idea of walking abroad in daylight, escorted by armed police, was by no means pleasant to her.

For a whole week, therefore, she

remained a prisoner : at the end of that time a rapid thaw set in. The snow dissolved and disappeared, leaving to the view a stretch of black bog land, dotted with dripping thatched cabins, and oozy with the recent fallen rain.

Panting, after her long confinement, for a breath of fresh air, Catherine put on her hat and cloak one evening, and walked in the shrubberies surrounding the Castle. The boughs of the trees were dripping, and the ground was spongy, but the air revived her, and strengthened the courage which the week of quietness had brought. It made her form a resolution to walk daily in the grounds until such time as she could shake off the shackles of the police, and drive abroad alone.

One evening, about a fortnight

from the time when this resolution was formed, she left the house to take her customary walk in the grounds. It was not late, but the days were short, and as she left the house she saw that a star was already glimmering beyond the peak of a distant hill; and that night was beginning to fall. The sky was of a bluish grey, flecked here and there with floating mist which settled in little clouds upon the hilltops, and the wind which touched her cheek was like an icy hand.

The police patrolling before the house, saluted as she passed by, and watched her disappear amongst the trees of the park.

She had walked for about ten minutes, choosing a narrow pathway, and was about to turn into an avenue of beech trees, when there

was a rustling and scuffling among the boughs. She started. A man whose face was averted from her was emerging from the dense brushwood, through which she had first passed.

"Why, he has no right to be here," thought Catherine; then she asked—"What are you doing here; this part of the park is quite private? If you want the house it lies in that direction, and that is the pathway to the road."

Thus addressed, the man half turned towards her, touched his hat, and moved on, in the direction of the Castle.

Catherine moved on, too; pacing the long beech avenue with erect head and springing step. About a quarter of an hour later, however, she was again startled: again the trees rustled, and suddenly she saw

a man, wearing a crape mask, cautiously creep from the coppice.

This time, before she could speak, he leapt into the avenue, and seized her round the waist.

So petrified was she by this sudden attack, that for a moment she could neither move nor cry, but when she felt herself being lifted from the ground and carried towards the woods, her power returned, she uttered a piercing shriek, and by a mighty effort tore herself from the assailant's grasp, and ran towards the Castle.

Immediately rattles were sprung, voices shouted, whistles shrieked, and lights flickered in the distance. But the alarm, great as it was, seemed to have no effect upon the ruffian. He raised his shrieking victim from the ground, put his

hand over her mouth and dragged her away. With tiger-like force she tore the hand away and shrieked.

"Help! help! will no one come?"

She tore, fought, struggled, and screamed until all her strength seemed ebbing from her. Presently the low murmur of voices reached her ear, she uttered a wild, wailing sob, and swooned away.

"Musha, deal gently with her—sée, thanks be to God, she's coming round. A little more water, Pat Monnaghan. Och, my curse, and the curses o' all good men on the villain that's doin' this!"

It was Catherine's favourite old groom who spoke, as he leaned tremblingly over the form of his mistress, who lay half swooning, her head resting on the heart of a man. The old man held a lantern,

the light of which was shed upon Catherine's face.

For some time that face had been white and cold, but now the blue lips had turned to a delicate pink, the eyelids quivered, then unclosed.

"Stand back!" said a voice she knew. "She's all right now."

She looked up and met the tender eyes of Mr. Langford.

"What has happened?" she asked, tremblingly.

"I was coming along the avenue, when I heard a call for help. I ran forward, and saw you struggling with a masked man. The moment I appeared the ruffian vanished. He was not alone—there were others with him, I'm sure."

"My men are searching the place," said the sergeant of police. "If the rascals are in the woods, we'll catch them!"

All Catherine's courage seemed to have failed her. She dropped her head, tears blinded her eyes, and putting her hand on Langford's arm, she said, faintly—

"Take me home!"

Gently and tenderly he led her back to the Castle. Meantime the police searched far and wide, but found no trace whatever of her assailants.

CHAPTER V.

THE commotion which followed this second assault was tremendous. For days Castle Craig was besieged with visitors, but Catherine kept to her room and would see no one. The newspaper representatives picked up scraps of news and related their story in their own style. Large placards were posted over the district offering a reward to any

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person who should be instrumental in bringing the offender to justice. Upon the strength of this several spurious arrests were made and ultimately dismissed, but no good was done. When this excitement was at its height Father John O'Donnell, the parish priest of Mulrany, came over to the Castle.

He was at once admitted.

It was seven o'clock in the evening, and Catherine was going through the form of eating her dinner. It was but a form. She sat like a drooping lily, toying with her knife and fork, but utterly unable to taste one of the many tempting dishes which were being set before her. When the priest entered the room she rose and held forth both her hands.

"Oh, Father John, I am so glad you have come!" she said, and then

she sank into her chair again and burst into tears.

The priest was rather taken aback; he could not bear to see a woman cry. He patted her head as if she had been a child, and said—

"My dear Miss Power, where is all your spirit, my child?"

"Oh, I have none," returned Catherine, drying her hands and flushing crimson, as if ashamed of her own weakness. "They have taken that all out of me. I would rather be a beggar than lead a life like this."

The priest looked at her keenly.

"You would change your mind, my child, if you found that your fortune was really gone."

"Nay, Father! Say rather I should live to bless the lips which have told me the good news. What happiness has money brought to

me? Before I came here I was allowed to live in peace, I could accept friendship when it was offered to me, I could believe in disinterested love. Since I became an heiress—only eighteen months ago—I have been the victim of two personal assaults, I have had to listen to fulsome professions of love when I have known that the words have been prompted only by a greed of gain. The heiress, not Catherine Power, has been fêted all round. I cannot even rest in bed unless policemen guard my doors. Oh, Father John, can you not believe, do you not see that the poorest peasant on my estate is happier than I am."

During the delivery of this speech the priest had watched the girl keenly. When she paused, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes,

he looked more intently into her face, and said quietly—

"I've spoken to the blackguard who's at the bottom of all this, and I don't think he'll trouble you any more."

"What do you mean?" asked Catherine, opening her eyes.

"I mean your rapscallion of a cousin, Patrick Blake," replied the priest. "I've suspected him all along. So I drove over to him last night and gave him a bit of my mind. He was for denying everything at first, but at last I got it out of him."

"He confessed?"

"He did much the same thing," replied the priest. "He cursed and swore till I put the Church's anathema on him and told him I'd make the county too hot to hold him or Mary Carey. And

before I left he gave me his word never to molest ye again, and to make Mary Carey an honest woman."

The worthy father omitted to state one thing; that his chief ally in bringing the young ruffian to reason was Mary Carey herself, who hated the heiress of Craig Castle with all her heart. The upshot was that Blake had gone off to Castlebar, and from thence to Dublin, among the dissipations of which last city he was trying to forget his disappintment.

Catherine breathed again. Quite certain now that Patrick Blake was the only enemy she had to fear, she rejoiced at his disappearance from the neighbourhood. Some weeks afterwards she remained under police protection, but at last, quite convinced that the danger was over

she dismissed her escort, and resumed her ordinary way of life.

During all this time, Mr. Langford had been a constant visitor. She received him cordially, for she could not forget that he had now a great claim on her gratitude, since he had been in the truest sense of the word her preserver. But always, when he touched on the old theme, she was determined.

"All that has taken place," she said, "only makes me more and more resolved not to change my condition. When the men quite realise that I mean to remain an old maid, they will let me severely alone."

"Why do you class all men together?" asked Langford, sadly. "Was there ever a love like mine?"

"I don't know," answered the

lady, thoughtfully. "My cousin must have cared for me very much, or he would never have acted so desperately. Poor fellow!"

Langford's dark eyes flashed angrily.

"You pity that scoundrel?"

"Of course I pity him. Really he has paid me the greatest compliment possible—he thought me worth taking by storm. After all," she continued, roguishly, "there was something charming in the old days, when marriage by capture was the fashion, and the strongest man won. Speaking for myself, I don't think I should ever surrender to any man, unless he made me!"

"You are a puzzle, Catherine, like all women."

"I suppose I am. I wonder, now, what would have happened if my savage cousin had really

carried me away? I suspect I should have had to make the best of a bad bargain. But there, we live in the nineteenth century, and although it's in Ireland, there's very little romance left."

"And you will not become my wife?"

"No, thank you," she replied, smiling, "though, indeed, I like you very much."

A few days later Captain Kennedy called at the Castle.

"Young Blake has returned from Dublin," he said. "I thought it as well to let you know, in case you'd like to have police protection again."

Miss Power declined.

"I think there is no necessity. My cousin has come to his senses."

The next day she drove in her carriage past Carey's inn. Patrick

Blake stood on the bank of the river fishing, and, bowing as she passed, took off his cap with a polite grin!"

"It's all right," she reflected. "My savage is quite cured!"

In this, possibly, she made a miscalculation. Two days later occurred the extraordinary catastrophe described in the opening of our story. The victim of her own foolhardiness, Miss Power disappeared, with the strongest suspicion of foul play; and before another night had passed, her cousin, Patrick Blake, was a prisoner in the hands of the police.

CHAPTER VI.

THE arrest of Patrick Blake caused no little commotion in the district, where, in spite of his wild habits, and more probably on account of them, he was a general favourite. The Irish heart instinctively sympathises, in and out of season, with a scapegrace, especially if he is ousted from a possession or an inheritance, and the young man was a lawful heir,

from the popular point of view, of Craig Castle and the contingent estates.

But the arrest having been made, the authorities were still placed between the horns of a dilemma.

There was no absolute proof that a serious crime had been committed —no absolute proof that Miss Power was either living or dead. To establish a charge of murder it was absolutely necessary to show that some one had been murdered, and how was it possible to do that, under the circumstances?

Brought up before the magistrates at Newport, Patrick Blake was charged "on suspicion" of having abducted and made away with Miss Catherine Power of Craig Castle, and with having, on a former occasion, offered her personal violence.

Peter Linnie, who appeared for the prisoner, laughed the charge to scorn. It was absurd, he said, to connect his client with the crime, which had never in all probability been committed, and of which, at any rate, there was no proof whatever. As to the second count, it was even more ridiculous, seeing that Blake and his cousin, shortly after he was supposed to have offered her personal violence, were on excellent terms.

Captain Kennedy proved, however, that the missing lady had gone about in bodily fear of her cousin, and had asked for police protection. He also produced the cloak and blood-stained handkerchief which had been found near the spot of the assault, and they were identified as the property of Miss Power.

The car-driver, Feeny, testified to the assault itself on the momentous evening, but, cross-examined by Linnie, he was unable to swear positively as to the number or appearance of the assailants. Immediately on their re-appearance he had been knocked down and rendered insensible; on his recovery he had distinctly heard his mistress's voice screaming for help some distance away; and, instead of hastening to her assistance, he had driven off to give the alarm to the police.

Among the witnesses called was Mr. Langford, who seemed greatly annoyed and grieved at being questioned at all.

Asked if Miss Power had ever expressed fear of her cousin, or had identified him as the author of the first attack, he answered with some reluctance in the affirma-

tive. His evidence, however, seemed of very little importance until Peter Linnie rose to cross-examine him.

"Come now, Mr. Langford, speak the truth like an honest man, and remember, if you please, that you are on your oath."

"I am not likely to forget it," answered Langford, sadly.

"I hope not, sir. You say you were an intimate acquaintance of Miss Power?"

"I was."

"You knew she was a fairly wealthy lady?"

"Certainly."

"And you yourself were a very poor man?"

"Not a rich man, at any rate."

"Not a rich man, at any rate. So it came into your head, maybe, that it might be a good thing if

you could persuade her to share her wealth with you?"

Langford's eyes flashed angrily.

"I certainly did ask her to become my wife," he replied.

"Did she consent?"

"No, she refused."

"Once, or more than once?"

"More than once."

"And you were aware at that time that there was another Richmond in the field? That her cousin, Mr. Blake, had proposed to her?"

"No."

"No? Come now, didn't you know it?"

"I thought it was possible, but I had no actual knowledge of the fact."

"That will do for me. You knew then that you had a rival, and that the more you could discredit him, the better your own chance might be."

"I never gave him the slightest thought or consideration."

"But after Miss Power disappeared, you went to the police barracks and gave certain information?"

"I went there merely to make inquiries, for I was very anxious."

"Aha! but you suggested or insinuated, that your rival, Mr. Blake, might be the guilty person?"

"Nothing of the kind. It was suggested to me that he might be guilty, but I could not believe it."

"But you believe it now?"

The reply was remarkable.

"No! I do not believe it!"

Even Peter Linnie was astonished. He sat down triumphant, and then rose to call his own witnesses.

John Carey and Michael Conolly swore positively that on the after-

noon and evening of the 7th of January the prisoner was in their company, and that he could not possibly have been concerned in an attack which took place many miles away. Then Mary Carey entered the box and gave exidence to the same effect.

Cross-examined, a little injudiciously, as to her own personal relations with the prisoner, she admitted that she was deeply attached to him, and that he was certainly in her society.

"Did you ever hear him speak about his cousin?"

"I did then, often."

"Did he ever threaten to do her an injury?"

"Not he, sir. But he often said that she'd done him the biggest injury of all by robbing him of his inheritance."

"I see. And he was very bitter in consequence?"

"I don't know about that."

"Were you aware that he had offered to marry her, and had been shown the door?"

"I wasn't."

"Didn't he tell you as much?"

"Sorra word. All he said once was that there was a gentleman after her named Langford, and that Langford hated him, and meant to do him a bad turn."

Every one looked at Langford, who was white as death.

"Do you know—remember you are on your solemn oath—do you know anything either from first knowledge or hearsay of what has become of the young lady?"

"No."

"Did you not, on a recent occasion, inform the inspector of con-

stabulary that if he was able to drag the deep sea he might find her?"

"I did," replied Mary, with a smile.

"How came you to make use of that expression?"

"Sure, they told me she wasn't to be found on land, so I thought if she wasn't anywhere on land, she must be somewhere in the water!"

The questioner sat down, and Peter Linnie rose.

"I'll only ask you one question, Mary Carey. Did Mr. Blake ever in your hearing threaten to harm his cousin?"

"Never, sir."

"You adhere to that statement?"

"I do, sir," replied Mary, and she stood down after exchanging a rapid look with Blake.

The magistrates were puzzled. Not that they attached any serious

importance to the evidence for the defence; in that part of Ireland perjury is so common among the lower classes that it is frequently the custom not to swear certain witnesses at all, and the impression in this case was that, if Blake was guilty, the persons brought forward to prove an alibi were simply his confederates. But in point of fact there was no real evidence whatever against the prisoner, and the magistrates were at a loss what to do.

At this point, Captain Kennedy asked for a remand, stating that by information in his possession, but as yet incomplete, he hoped in a week's time to bring forward satisfactory evidence of the prisoner's guilt. While the magistrates were still hesitating and consulting how to proceed, a man entered the court and handed a letter to Mr. Langford.

"We have decided to remand the prisoner for a week," said the presiding magistrate, "but we will accept moderate bail for his appearance."

Then an extraordinary incident occurred.

Still very pale, and now greatly excited, Mr. Langford rose up, holding in his hand the letter which he had just received.

"One moment, if you please," he said. "I must ask you to discharge the prisoner at once. I hold in my hand the proof of his complete innocence."

A murmur of amazement went round the room.

"The proof? What proof?" asked the magistrate.

"A letter from the person chiefly concerned."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of Miss Catherine Power."

The murmur grew to a roar.

"Miss Power," proceeded Langford, "is alive and perfectly well, and it is her wish that Mr. Blake should be at once set at liberty."

He handed up the letter, which ran as follows :—

To Mr. Langford.

"Oblige me by informing the magistrates at Newport that I am safe at home in Craig Castle, and that the inquiry into my fate need go no further. Request them to release my cousin from custody without an instant's delay. I have no charge to make against any one whatever.

"Catherine Power."

The news came like a thunderclap on all concerned. "Parturiunt

montes et nascitur ridiculus mus." Instead of lying dead in some unknown spot at the bottom of the sea, the missing heiress, after an absence of four days and nights, was seated quietly at home. There could be no doubt about it—the letter was in her handwriting. Strangest of all, she offered no explanation of what had occurred, and proffered no accusation.

As the news was proclaimed, another look of rapid intelligence passed between Patrick Blake and Mary Carey. Then Father O'Donnell, who was present, waved his arms in the air with a wild cheer, which was taken up by the crowd of spectators.

As Blake walked from the court accompanied by his friends, he passed close to Langford, who stood like a man dazed and overwhelmed.

Their eyes met, and Blake said between his set teeth:

"Don't forget what I promised you. I mean to keep my word."

And as Langford shrugged his shoulders and turned wearily away, Blake added to Mary Carey:

"I'll be even with him, for having me arrested like a dog."

Fast as his horse could trot, Father O'Donnell hastened to the Castle, and Captain Kennedy sat beside him on the car.

"Powers above, it's a miracle!" ejaculated the priest, joyfully. "She alive after all, God bless her, and me that was fretting my heart out for her as if she was my own flesh and blood."

"But what can have happened to her?" cried Kennedy; "we haven't got to the bottom of the mystery yet."

On arriving at the Castle, they found that the news was perfectly true. Early that forenoon, the mistress of the house had quietly returned home on foot, as if nothing unusual had occurred. She seemed a little fatigued, that was all, and went at once to her own room, whence, shortly afterwards, she despatched the messenger to Langford.

They were shown up into her boudoir, they found Catherine seated, dressed in a loose morning wrapper, and with her beautiful hair flowing loose over her shoulders. She looked pale and worn, with dark rings of fatigue round her eyes, but held out her hand to them with a smile.

Tears of joy rolled down the good priest's face, as he sank on his knees beside her, and offered up his thanks to God for her preservation.

Then the fervour of the priest gave way to the curiosity of the man.

"And now, my child, tell us all about it! What has happened, acushla machree?"

"Unfortunately, I can tell you nothing," she replied, gently. "All my wish now is to forget what has happened. It is over—let it be forgotten."

"But, my dear child——"

"My cousin is at liberty, I hope?" she said, addressing Captain Kennedy.

"Yes, miss," was the reply. "They released him at once on the arrival of your letter."

"I am glad of that. The affair, then, will go no further?"

"It can't, miss, unless you yourself take action."

"I shall not do so," said Catherine, with a sigh.

Sorely puzzled, Captain Kennedy took his leave. He had still no doubt whatever that Blake, in some mysterious way, was concerned in Catherine's disappearance, and he was quite at a loss to understand her apathy in the matter.

Father O'Donnell remained alone with Catherine. They talked together quietly for some time, and then, her beautiful eyes full of tears and her voice choking, Catherine said—

"What I wouldn't tell to my dearest friend I wish now to confess to my priest;" and she knelt before him and made confession.

As she proceeded his astonishment increased, and when she had finished he was pale as a ghost with mingled wonder and indignation. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet, he couldn't have been more amazed.

CHAPTER VII.

PATRICK BLAKE was the hero of the hour. He had a kind of royal progress on his way back to Carey's inn, where he had arranged to resume his quarters, and wherever he went the peasantry cheered him to the echo. He had performed that finest of all feats in the eyes of the Irish populace, he had been one too many for the police.

But amid all his exultation, he was furious: furious that he, a gentleman, had been arrested and cast in durance vile like a common felon, furious with the examination which had exposed his relations with Mary Carey, and furious above all with Langford, who he persisted in regarding as the prime mover in the whole affair.

He flew to his usual remedy, the whisky bottle, for consolation. For several nights he never went sober to bed, and, indeed, he never went to bed at all—till he was carried.

On the fourth day after his liberation, as he sat moodily outside the inn with no other company than his own thoughts, he was astonished by an apparition. A car drawn by two handsome chestnuts drove up, and deposited

the fair form of Miss Catherine Power.

"I am glad I have found you," she said quietly, "I wish particularly to talk to you."

He rose with a curious look, something between a smile and a scowl, and replied—

"As you please. Shall we talk here, or will you go inside?"

"Is any one there?"

"Only Mary Carey."

"Then we'll talk outside. Come with me to the river bank."

They crossed the road together, and remained some time in earnest conversation, out of earshot of the driver of the car. As the conversation proceeded Blake seemed to be speaking angrily and fiercely, while Catherine pleaded to him in dumb show.

At last they returned. Blake's

pale face looked bright and triumphant, while Catherine's was blotted with tears. He assisted her on to the car, and raised his hat with a grin.

"Then it is a bargain?" she said, anxiously. "I have your promise?"

"Oh, yes," he answered, "mum's the word, cousin. Keep your promise and I'll keep mine!"

He stood with his hands in his pockets, whistling and laughing as he watched the car driven rapidly away. The sound of a footstep made him turn, and he encountered the eyes of Mary Carey. The girl's face was pale with passion, and her voice trembled as she said:

"I saw ye together. What brought her over here?"

"What do you think?" said Blake, laughing.

"I don't know and I don't care, but she'd better mind what she's after, if she comes again between you and me. I've had enough of that!"

"You're a fool, Mary."

"I'm no fool neither. I know what I'm talking about."

"She's come to her senses, that's all," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders, "she's afraid."

"May be she's reason."

"True for you. . . . She's going away to Dublin, she says."

"The devil go after her and stay along wid her."

"Stop a bit and whisper. This is what she wants."

And he whispered rapidly in the girl's ear.

"You don't mane that!" she cried.

"I do though."

"And what did you say?"

"I said I'd take the money and hold my tongue!"

"What would Mr. Langford say if he knew? Would he marry her after all?"

"Maybe he would!" said Blake, with a savage oath, "but I'll take care he never does. If she's too good for me in spite of all she's too good for him, the omadhun. I promised to let her alone, but I said nothing about him."

So saying he strode back to the inn, and seizing a bottle, poured himself out a glass of raw spirits.

"Here's her health," he cried. "May she live long and prosper! She has more sense than I gave her credit for!"

News of Catherine's visit to his rival was wafted in due course to Philip Langford; indeed he could

not fail to hear it, since it was a very common topic of conversation. Wiseacres, including Captain Kennedy, shook their heads over it; it corrobated their original suspicions, that there was some mysterious connection between the lady of the Castle and her savage kinsman, whom she was now anxious to keep silent.

Langford said nothing, but grew the very incarnation of silent despair. He had good reason to be miserable, for on two occasions when he had called at the Castle the lady had declined to see him. He wrote to her in passionate terms begging an interview; she replied very briefly to the effect that she had determined to see no one except the priest.

Father O'Donnell, the only person who was in her confidence, was very angry indeed when he

heard of her visit to Blake. He told her flatly that it was an act of folly.

"Everybody is talking of it, my child, and coupling your names together."

"What does it matter?" she exclaimed.

"But your reputation is concerned!"

"I am quite indifferent on the subject."

"Saints above!" cried the worthy father. "Do you know what they are saying, that you have bribed Patrick Blake to hold his tongue! My child, there is only one course open to you to tell the whole truth and punish the villain who has done you such shameful wrong?"

"I will never do that!" she answered, sobbing.

"Let me speak! Let me con-

front the scoundrel! Release me of my oath and let me punish him as he deserves."

"He is punished enough already," was the reply.

"Punished? He is a free man when he should be lying in the gaol at Castlebar."

"Sin, especially sin like his, is its own punishment," said Catherine. "May God forgive him!"

Arguments and remonstrances were useless; she was resolved on keeping her own counsel.

"But I have done one thing, dear Father," she said, finally; "I have spent the dreary hours here in writing down, over my own signature, the whole story which I have whispered to you in confession. It may be necessary some day to produce it, to vindicate my reputation from evil tongues. That task

I leave to you, should anything happen to me, but so long as I live I shall need and require no vindication."

She took from her escritoire a small manuscript book, and placed it in the priest's hands.

"While I was writing it down," she continued, "it all seemed a strange dream—horrible, unreal—and even now it scarcely seems to have happened. And now my mind is made up. I am going, for a time at least, to leave this place. I have friends in Dublin with whom I shall be safe and happy—as happy as I can ever be. You will see me there from time to time, will you not, and bring me any news? In the meantime, I know my secret is safe in your keeping."

The good priest gave her his blessing and departed, taking with

him the manuscript which she had written.

Next day all was commotion at Craig Castle, for its mistress was preparing to go away. She spent the morning in arranging domestic affairs, and dismissing, with a liberal bonus, the chief members of her establishment. The Castle was to remain under the charge of her housekeeper and one or two servants, and the coachman and one groom she retained to look after the stables. By the afternoon all preparations were completed, Catherine's heavy luggage despatched by car to Westport, and arrangements made for Catherine herself and her maid to be driven early next morning to the railway station of the same town.

She had just dined in solitary state, when a servant brought in a letter.

"Mr. Langford's waiting at the door, my lady. He asked me to give you this and get your answer."

She opened the letter, and read as follows:

"You are going away. For God's sake let me speak to you for one moment before you go."

Pale and trembling, yet quite collected, she wrote on the back of the letter in pencil.

"I wish to see no one. If you have any regard or respect left for me, you will go away as you came. I am going away, as you say, and it is my prayer that we should never meet again."

She enclosed the letter in a fresh envelope, which she sealed, and handed to the servant.

"Give that to Mr. Langford," she said, "and on no account let him enter the house."

Early the next morning she left the Castle in an open car, drawn by two horses, and driven by a new coachman, whom she had engaged temporarily in place of James Feeny. Only her maid went with her, and the servants, by whom she was adored, crowded at the door to bid her good-bye.

"Poor lady!" said the housekeeper, "she's heartbroken entirely, and no wonder."

It was a beautiful winter morning, the sun was shining brightly, and the grass and trees were sparkling through silver hoar frost. Inland rose the mountains, and southward shone the placid waters of Clew Bay. As she drove through the demesne to the lodge gate, Catherine looked on the quiet scene with silent tears. She had grown to love the place, and her heart ached to leave it.

"Shall I ever come back?" she thought. "God knows! Perhaps I may find peace and comfort far away."

As they passed through the lodge gates her heart leapt into her mouth, and she went deadly pale. Waiting on the high road was a man on horseback, whom she recognised at once.

Philip Langford.

His pale sad face looked careworn and inexpressibly sorrowful, and he stooped in the saddle as if under the weight of years, but when their eyes met, his flashed eagerly, and he held out his hand with an imploring gesture.

"Drive on!" said Catherine to the coachman, and averted her face.

The coachman whipped his horses, and the car passed swiftly by. Without once looking back, Catherine

clung to the seat as if in mortal terror; then, unable to control her agitation, she leant back and sobbed, covering her face with her hands.

As if turned to marble, Langford sat watching the car until it disappeared; even then he remained immovable, his face grey and livid, his eyes sunken in utter despair. At last, with an effort, he shook off his apathy, and rode slowly homeward to his house by the sea.

An old man met him on the lawn before the door, touched his hat, and looked wistfully up into his face.

"She has gone, yer honour!"

"Yes, Michael, and I believe she will never come back," answered Langford, alighting from his horse.

"Did yer honour spake wid her?"

Langford shook his head, and

walked slowly and feebly like a man death-struck, into the house. He entered a small sitting-room on the ground floor, and, falling into a chair, sat with his eyes fixed before him, looking on vacancy.

A face looked into the room—that of an old woman.

"God bless yer honour," the woman said, entering the door. "Have you come back? And Miss Catherine? Did ye spake wid her?"

He answered her with a despairing look of his dark eyes.

"She went away without a word!" cried the old woman. "O, wirasthrue, wirasthrue! And she that knew well your heart was breaking for her sake! May the Lord above punish her for turning away in her pride from the best man that ever drew breath!"

"Don't say that, Nannie," said Langford, sadly. "Say rather with me, may God bless her, and forgive me for what I've done!"

. . . . .

While this scene was taking place at Langford House, Father John O'Donnell was seated alone by the fireside, in his cottage at Mulrany, smoking his pipe, and perusing, with many doleful shakes of the head, the manuscript which Catherine had committed to his care.

And it ran as follows.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE house is quite still, every one has retired to rest, and I am sitting alone in my boudoir, trying to piece together the terrible experiences of the last few days, and to write them down. Even now they scarcely seem real; they rather seem like those flashes which haunt us when we are suddenly awaked from

strange dreams. Lest they should fade altogether, as dream memories do, I am going to recall them as vividly as I can ; then, when I have committed them to paper, I shall give the writing to the only friend I have left, my good priest, who loves me like a father. In his care I know it will be sacred, but if ever occasion should (which God forbid), it may be my justification.

Before I proceed to my narrative, however, let me frankly own to myself, and to any one who may hereafter read these words, that I have been justly punished for my own frivolousness and folly. Like many another thoughtless woman, I played with fire, little thinking that it might some day imperil my life and honour. A young girl, alone in the world, and with no guide but her own caprice, cannot

be too circumspect in her relations with the opposite sex. I, so far from being circumspect, was foolhardy. Treated like a spoiled child, idolised and flattered on every hand, I craved only for sympathy and adoration, and I was careless in awakening feelings to which I never intended seriously to respond. Although not at heart a coquette, I certainly behaved like one, and I have paid the penalty.

All that I can urge in my own defence is that my position was a peculiar one, and that I had little or no experience. Brought up in England, where people were so much more sophisticated and commonplace, I was placed under extraordinary circumstances in the midst of a society which was to a great extent unconventional. My suitors, gentlemen in external appearance,

had all the strong passions and prejudices of the half-civilised. They could not understand mere friendship; they mistook frankness for cordiality, and camaraderie for love. A kind word, a gentle look, a pressure of the hand, was interpreted instantly into the warmest of sentiments.

Thus it was that I began so unfortunately with my cousin, Patrick Blake. I was really sorry for him, I wanted to show him that I was truly his kinswoman, and before I knew what I was doing, I had made him think that I was in love with him, and that he had only to ask and to have. He did ask, and I had to be cruel. As the issue showed, I was not cruel enough.

Then, again, another consideration weighed with me. I felt, rightly or wrongly, that most of

those who pursued me, including my savage cousin, did so because I was a wealthy woman, and I felt a malicious pleasure in dangling my fortune before them and making them believe that it was attainable. All the time I was saying in my own mind, "I mean to amuse myself with the foolish creatures as much as I please, but, until I find a man who loves me for myself alone, I will never marry."

This might have been all very well in civilised England; among the wild mountains of Western Ireland it was playing a desperate game.

When Patrick Blake first offered to marry me I was amused; he seemed to think the assault so easy. Even when all his pent-up passion broke stormily upon me, I was still amused and even flattered. His

threats seemed those of an ill-conditioned schoolboy; I could not realise that they had any serious meaning.

I discovered very quickly that I was wrong, and tried in vain, by gentle measures, to repair the mischief I had done. I still felt sorry for him, knowing that I had inherited what he might otherwise have possessed, and I wished to show him all the kindness in my power. This amiability, I think now, was a mistake.

I realised my position for the first time after that first attack in the woods. I knew by instinct that my assailant was no vulgar robber, and I identified him almost immediately as my Cousin Patrick. What his reason was for so apparently aimless an assault I could not understand, but I had heard that he

was in league with desperate men, and I called in the protection of the police.

It was at this juncture that another suitor for my hand, Mr. Philip Langford, interposed as a possible protector. He had already proposed to me, and I had declined his offer; he now renewed his suit with tenfold fervour. I had to answer him as before. But, with a woman's perversity, I answered him so tenderly as to retain him as a sort of unaccredited cavalier. Instead of dismissing him at once and for ever, I deceived myself and him with the will-o'-the-wisp of friendship.

Then came the second attack on my person, from which, as I believed, I was saved by the man whose offer of marriage I had more than once rejected. Again I seemed to recognise the work of my cousin, and

I remembered his words—"If you refuse to have me, you shall have no other man!" Terrified beyond measure, I was almost tempted to take Mr. Langford at his word, and constitute him my legal protector. From this step I was deterred by two considerations—my own wish to retain my freedom, and Mr. Langford's irritating pertinacity.

Let me be quite frank. My feelings towards Mr. Langford were very different from those which I entertained for Mr. Blake. In every possible respect the two men were a contrast to each other. My cousin, despite his good looks, was what I have described him to be, an untutored boy, the slave of low passions and coarse vices. Mr. Langford, on the contrary, was a perfect gentleman, handsome, fascinating even, and without a stain

upon his character. Never, under any circumstances, could I have hesitated between these two suitors; one of them repelled me in every way, while the other attracted me continually.

I will now, without further preamble, come to the occurrences of the last fortnight, and to that extraordinary adventure with which they culminated.

My persecutions had ceased, my days were gliding uneventfully along, and I had almost forgotten my cousin's existence, when news was brought to me that he had returned from a long visit to Dublin. A little nervous, and anxious to ascertain if I was forgiven, I contrived to drive past the inn where he resided, and to catch a glimpse of him face to face. His manner relieved all my fears. He seemed

light-hearted and merry, and I thought to myself, "He is cured, and I sha'n't be troubled any more."

That evening Mr. Langford called upon me, and, referring incidentally to the fact of my cousin's return, again asked me to become his wife.

"You know my decision," I replied, "and really your renewal of the subject is a little monotonous!"

"Why do you still refuse to marry me?" he asked, fixing those sad eyes of his upon me. "Do you hate me so much?"

"If I hated you," I replied, "I would not receive you here;" then laughingly I added, "I really believe that my cousin, savage as he is, loves me better than you do!"

"Why do you say that?" he asked, gently.

"Well, he is thorough, at any rate. He does not hang after my heels and fetch and carry. He is like one of the old knights, who loved desperately, and tried to seize by force what he could not win by favour. At any rate, he is romantic!"

It was a foolish speech, as the issue proved.

Two days afterwards I drove into Westport and cashed a cheque at the bank; then, as the afternoon was fine, I determined to drive over to Ballycroy, dine with an old friend of mine, Mrs. Bourne, and return home next morning. I apprehended no danger, and had almost forgotten that I had an enemy in the world.

The sun was low down in the western sky, when, leaving behind us the village of Mulrany, we drove along the desolate road which

winds through the mountains of Mayo, following the long arm or estuary of the sea, beyond which rise other mountains, culminating in the highest peak of the Island of Achill. To our right the mountains rose precipitously into granite peaks, which shone clear and distinct in the rosy light. Not a sound disturbed the solitude, save now and again the cry of a seagull or the faint "honk-honk" of the wild goose winging high up in the air.

Never had my heart felt lighter and more full of peace.

Mile after mile we drove through the solitude, and not one human being passed us on the road. At last we came in sight of the old bridge near Ballyveeny, through which the river flows, emptying itself into the salt estuary.

"It's a lonesome spot, your ladyship," said the driver, turning to me and touching his hat. "It was here that the boys laid in wait for Lord Sligo's agent."

"What happened?" I asked, smiling.

"Well, sure they waited under the bridge two nights and days, and Mr. Smith, the agent, didn't come, and on the third night, when he did come, they were drunk as lords, and though they fired at the car devil a ha'porth of harrum came of it; but the horse galloped off with Mr. Smith and the driver, and young Mr. Smith, a boy of seventeen, jumped off wid his little small pea-rifle and shot one of the men in the back just as he was running over the brow of the hill."

"Was he killed?"

"Clane, and there he lay on his

face gripping his gun till Dr. Croley came and found him, and afterwards young Mr. Smith had to lave the country for fear of his own life."

So saying, he whipped up the horses and approached the bridge at a rapid trot.

By this time it was almost dark, the sun had gone down behind the mountains of Achill, and the shadows of night were closing in on every side.

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, just as we were about to cross the bridge, the figure of a man dashed from the roadside and seized the horses, which reelgd back, almost overthrowing the car. At the same moment three other men, with blackened faces, appeared at my side, and before I could uttef a cry for help I saw the driver fall

from his seat to the ground, and felt myself seized and lifted from the car. I struggled and screamed, but a hand was placed over my mouth and a rough voice cried, "Hould your paace!"

Then, I suppose, I must have fainted away.

When I recovered my senses I could see nothing. Some dark substance was flung around my head and face, almost suffocating me, and I was being borne along, I knew not whither, in a man's arms. I struggled wildly, tore the wrappings away, and shrieked aloud. As I did so I saw the blackened faces of several men. The next moment my head and face were again covered, and my voice was smothered in thick folds.

"Keep silence, my lady!" said a voice. "We don't want to harm

you, but we'll have to do it if you're not aisy!"

In spite of this warning I tried again to call for help, but it was in vain. Terrified and horrified beyond measure, I again swooned away.

On recovering a second time I found myself still blindfolded, with my hands tightly bound. Then, listening intently, I heard a sound like the splashing of oars, and I realised in a moment that I was lying in a boat of some sort and rocking upon the water.

Suddenly the sound ceased, and a voice said—

"Wheest, I see a light yonder on the land!"

"Kape in the shadow," said another voice. "It's the peelers drivin' down from Mulrany."

The sound of oars was resumed, and I felt the boat gliding rapidly

on. Sick with fear, I struggled to release myself, but a hand was placed upon me, gently enough, and I could not stir.

"Lie still, honey," said the voice I had heard first. "No harm will come to ye, and ye may close your eyes and sleep as safely as if ye were in your own room at home."

"Who are you?" I murmured. "Where are you taking me to? For God's sake——"

Another voice, stronger and deeper, evidently that of a young man, now broke in.

"We're friends, your ladyship, friends entirely. We wouldn't hurt a hair of your ladyship's head, and we're takin' ye to a place where you'll be safe and well."

"You cowards, why don't you kill me? It would be better for me to be dead than lying here."

This time there was no reply, but I heard the men whispering together in the Irish tongue. The oars went faster and faster, and the boat glided on.

Why linger over the hours of that night? All my appeals were in vain, and I remained utterly helpless.

Presently the boat began to toss heavily, and I could hear the waves dashing violently against its sides, while from time to time a dash of sea spray soaked the veil which covered my face. The sound of oars ceased, and directly the boat heeled over under sail.

It was now bitterly cold, and I could feel that a strong wind was blowing, and that the boat was rushing swiftly through the water. The waves splashed, the wind whistled, and the light craft seemed

plunging up and down in the trough of a stormy sea.

Terrified as I was, I think I must have fallen to sleep. Unclosing my eyes, still in complete darkness, I heard one of the men saying—

"Poor lady, she's worn out entirely! May the Lord help her. Musha, this is a bad night's work!"

I was still lying where they had placed me, and I was quite warm. A bundle of some soft material formed a pillow for my head.

The heavy veil had been partially withdrawn from my head, but I was still blindfolded, and my hands were bound.

I lay still thinking. It was clear enough to me now that my captors, whoever they might be, meant me no immediate bodily harm. Still

my position was a horrible one, and, realising it to the full, I felt sick with suspense and terror.

At last I summoned strength to speak again.

"If my cousin, Patrick Blake, is here, will he speak to me?" I cried.

There was no answer.

"I ask you, is my cousin here?"

"Ax no questions, my lady," said a voice, "and we'll tell you no lies."

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll soon know, my lady, if you'll keep aisy. Lie quiet, and hould your tongue, like a swate lady, as ye are."

It was useless to plead or question; I was in their power, and utterly helpless. I still heard the plashing of the water and the whistling of the wind, while the boat swept swiftly from wave to

wave. Hours must have passed thus, while again and again, exhausted and wearied out, I fell into fitful slumber.

Suddenly the noise of wind and storm subsided, and we seemed to have slipped into smooth water. A few minutes later there was a slight shock, as if the boat was rushing in on shingle or sand, and I heard the men crying to each other—

"Lower the sail; run her up, boys."

"Another pull."

"Aisy now, that'll do."

"Hould the light there!"

"Saints be praised we're out of that."

"Hurry now, hurry—here wid the light!"

Some one bent over me and drew off the rugs which covered me, saying—

"You're safe now, my lady, and you'll soon be snug by a warm fire."

And I was raised in two strong arms.

"Let me go," I cried. "Where are you taking me?"

I screamed aloud, but my voice was quickly drowned, and I was myself being carried rapidly away. Whoever my captor was, his strength must have been great, for he ran with me as if I were no weight at all, and I heard his companion following. My next impression was of being carried up steps into a house of some sort, and then up a steep flight of stairs. At this my terror deepened, as was natural, and I shrieked again.

"Wheest, wheest, my lady!" cried a woman's voice. "You're safe now, saints be praised, wid your friends."

Nevertheless I continued to cry and struggle, while the man who held me in his arms continued to ascend. At length we paused, and I was set down, but still held in a powerful grip.

"Open the door," cried a voice which I seemed to know.

There was the sound like the drawing of a bolt and the turning of a lock, and I was drawn forward. I heard the movement of several persons around me; then I was placed gently on a seat, and my hands were unbound. While I raised my hands to tear off the covering from my eyes, I heard the door close and a lock turn. With a cry I drew away the covering—it was a large handkerchief of white silk—and looked around me.

It was a large old-fashioned chamber, furnished as a bedroom. Round

the walls ran a wainscot of polished oak, very old and worn, and the floor was of the same material. There was an open fireplace and a bright turf fire was burning on the hearth and casting ghostly lights upon the walls.

In one corner of the room was a small modern bedstead of brass, with clean white hangings and bedding, and close to it a large armchair, in which I was seated. There was one small window to the room, hung with snow-white curtains, and near it a dressing-table and looking-glass, with hair brushes, scent bottles, and pincushion. It was clear that an attempt had been made to make the room comfortable and pretty, possibly for my reception.

But my spirit was now up in arms against the outrage and indignity which I had suffered. Rushing

to the door, I tried to open it; it was locked from the outside. I ran to the window and threw it open, but it was black night all around, and I could see nothing. In my desperation I think I should have leapt out, but the window was protected by close iron bars.

Returning to the door, I struck at it again and again with my clenched hands.

"Open, open!" I cried.

There was a shuffling step on the landing, and the same woman's voice which I had heard before said—

"What is it, my lady?"

"Open the door, I command you. I wish to leave this place. Open! Open!"

And I struck at the panel with all my strength.

"Sure, you can't lave to-night, my lady," said the voice. "Bide

in peace till the morning, and ye shall do as ye plase."

"I will go at once! I forbid you to detain me! Open, I say!"

There was no answer, though I continued to beat upon the door and to cry for help. At last, worn out and despairing, I crossed the room and threw myself into the armchair.

What could it mean? What house was it? And why had I been brought here? I could think of only one explanation—that my cousin, Patrick Blake, had fulfilled his threats and had carried me off by force, with the aid of his desperate companions. If so, what was to become of me? To what further degradation and humiliation was I to be subjected?

As I sat thus, trembling and thinking, the door opened suddenly

and an old woman entered the room. I sprang up, and as I did so the door was closed and locked behind her.

She stood looking at me sadly, rocking her head from side to side. Her hair was white as snow, her face not unkindly, and though her form was bent with years, she still seemed hale and strong.

"Who are you?" I cried, facing her. "What place is this, and why have I been brought here?"

"Bide a bit, my swate lady," she replied; "the masther himself will come to ye."

"The master? Whom do you mean?"

"I mane one who loves ye as the light and sunshine of his life, acushla—one who would die for ye if need be—one who is waiting and praying for your forgiveness."

"Do you mean my cousin, Patrick Blake?" I asked, wildly.

"Bide a bit, bide a bit," she said, gently. "Sit ye down, and let old Nannie bring ye bite and sup before ye lie down and sleep. Ye may do that same in pace, my lady, for him that adores ye is watching over ye!"

Trembling between anger and amaze, I pushed past her, and again rushed to the door. At that moment it opened, and a man appeared on the threshold.

I knew him in a moment.

What was my amazement to recognise, not the man whom I had suspected—but Mr. Philip Langford.

His face was very pale, but his expression was calm and determined.

With a cry of horrified wonder

I recoiled before him, and stood gazing wildly into his face, while the old woman, trembling and muttering to herself, slipt past him and left the room. He approached nearer. I stood still, looking at him, my heart throbbing and all my blood boiling in indignation against him.

"My God," I murmured, "then it was you!"

He bent his head and his face grew paler still.

"Will you listen to me," he said, in a low voice, "I wish to explain everything"

"I will not listen," I said indignantly, "I have nothing to say to you, I wish to leave this house, I——"

As I moved to pass him he turned to the door, closed it, and stood with his back to it looking at me.

"You must remain where you are," he said, "at least to-night. Do so, and I swear to you that no harm shall come to you. For what I have done, Catherine, I ask your forgiveness. I was mad, perhaps, but I took you at your word. It was my last chance."

I remained stupefied, at a loss to comprehend him, only conscious of a sickening horror and dread of him. He saw and understood the expression on my face, and continued in his low, sad musical voice—

"You remember what you said—that he who married you must win you even against your own will? The devil put it in my head to do it, and you are here. This is my house. Your person is sacred in it, but I wish you to remain as its mistress—as my wife."

"Your wife?" I repeated. "You coward! I will never forgive you, never again take your hand even in friendship, and for what you have done to me you shall be punished, be sure of that. Stand aside, sir, and let me go!"

"It is too late for that, Catherine, even if it were my will that we should part. It is not my will—you must remain!"

I struggled to pass him, but he stood like a rock. In my mad passion I struck him in the face with all my strength. He smiled sadly and looked into my eyes.

"You see it is useless," he said, "what is done is done. I would gladly recall it, but regrets are always in vain. By this time the alarm has been given, and you are being sought for far and wide. It will be thought, no doubt, that you

are dead, murdered perhaps. Well, *après?* No one will guess the truth until I choose to reveal it. In the meantime I ask you to think it all over—to remember the love I bear you—and to ask yourself is it not better to resign oneself to the inevitable?"

"You mean that I am your prisoner? That you will dare to detain me here? Think what you are doing! Suffer me to go now, and I will try to forget what you have done!"

"There is only one way now," he answered, quietly. "You must consent to be my wife."

"I will never do that!" I cried. "Never, never! even if I had ever cared for you, what you have done would make me hate you and despise you. I thought you were a gentleman—you are a scoundrel

—a scoundrel, and a miserable coward!"

"Whatever I am I love you, Catherine. That is all the defence I have to offer."

"Help, there, help!" I cried.

"It is useless," he said, "no one will heed you. The people are bound to me, and they have their instructions. If you are wise you will remain here quietly. Whatever you need or ask for shall be brought to you. My old housekeeper will look after your comfort. You may assure yourself that you are perfectly safe under this roof—rest here in peace—and to-morrow I will come to you again."

Before I could answer him again, he slipped out of the door, which he locked upon me. Convinced now that escape was impossible, I threw myself into the chair,

and fell into a passion of angry tears.

Presently I grew calmer. All my pride was aroused, and I determined, by one method or another, to be even with the man who had used me so infamously. Instead of struggling in vain to escape, I would await my opportunity, and seize it. There was nothing else to do.

Suddenly I heard voices through the window. I arose, looked out, and listened. All was still very dark, but I distinctly heard the voice of Langford giving some directions. A gruff voice replied, "All right, your honour," then I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs growing fainter and fainter. Some one was galloping away from the house.

I returned to my seat, and sat looking at the fire.

Presently the door opened, and the old woman appeared, carrying a tray covered with a white napkin. On the tray was a basin of broth, some biscuits, and a glass of wine.

This time I made no attempt to escape, but remained seated, watching the woman, who placed the tray on a small table beside me.

"Will your ladyship ate and drink something?" she said, coaxingly. "Sure it's poor fare for a great lady like you, but it's the best ould Nannie can offer ye this night."

"Where is your master?" I asked.

"He's ridden away to Mulrany," was the reply. "I was to tell you he'd be back at daybreak."

In a moment I leapt to my feet and ran to the door which stood

wide open, but on the threshold I was captured by two men who stood on the landing; one was old, the other young, but both were strong and powerful.

"Ye can't pass, my lady," said the older man. "We're to watch over you till the master comes back!"

"For God's sake, let me go!" I cried. "Help me from this house. I am rich; you shall be well rewarded; you know I am a prisoner here; you know I have been kept here against my will, and——"

"Sure we know all that, my lady," answered the old man respectfully, "but we've our orders from the masther. You don't lave here till it's his pleasure that you shall go!"

"Come now, honey, and ate a bit," said the old woman, softly.

I looked at the men, and saw

that they were determined, and with an angry cry I walked back to my prison.

How the rest of the night passed I scarcely remember. I was again left alone to my own wild thoughts, and at last, worn out and hopeless, I must have fallen asleep.

I awoke shivering. The fire had gone out, and the cold grey dawn was creeping in through the window. I arose wearily and looked out. The room I occupied was at the top of the house; below it was a large paved yard, with stable and outbuildings, and beyond that a dreary prospect of bog and mountain.

A man was in the yard whistling and polishing some harness. He was a young and stalwart peasant, and I had never, to my knowledge, seen his face before.

He looked up and our eyes met, but he immediately turned his face away. I opened the window and called to him ; he paid no attention whatever. I looked around on every side, and saw only the dreary landscape lighted by a rainy dawn, but suddenly I heard the sound of a horse galloping, and immediately afterwards Mr. Langford, wet and mud-bestained, rode into the yard.

He alighted and handed his horse to the man, who said something to him, and he looked up towards the window and waved his hand.

I turned away from the window and waited quietly. In a few minutes I heard a footstep on the landing, and there was a knock at the door.

"May I come in?" said the voice of the master of the house.

I made no reply. After a brief pause the key was turned in the lock, the door opened, and Mr. Langford appeared.

"Good-morning, Catherine," he said.

I sat silent, and did not even look at him.

"I hope you have rested?" he continued. "I shouldn't have disturbed you had I not seen that you were up and awake."

I remained in the same position, my face averted, my eyes on the empty fireplace, but when he approached and bent over me, I sprang to my feet.

"Do not touch me!" I cried.

"Forgive me," he said. "I was merely anxious on your account. Believe me, I would give my life to undo what I have done."

"Have you come to set me

free?" I asked, panting and gazing fiercely into his face.

"No," he replied; and while I uttered an angry cry, he continued: "I have come to tell you that they are searching for you far and wide. Close to the bridge at Mulrany they have found your cloak and a blood-stained handkerchief, and the impression is that you have been killed, thrown into the river, and swept out to sea. I myself, as in duty bound, have been assisting in the search, and I have offered a reward of one hundred pounds to any one who will explain the mystery of your disappearance."

So saying he drew forth a printed placard, which offered the reward in question. I looked at it in wonder, and from him to it. There was a strange smile on his

face, but his lips were quivering, and his eyes kept their usual sadness.

"You see I am 'thorough,' as you once called it. Thanks to my ingenuity, no one will ever think of looking for you here. No one will suspect that Philip Langford, who offers a reward for your discovery, and is himself so active in instructing the police, is really the prime agent in the whole affair."

I gazed at him in terror; the whole scheme seemed so cold-blooded, so diabolical.

"God will punish you," I exclaimed, "even if I can't!"

The smile faded away, and he replied wearily—

"God has punished me already. I have staked my soul on this hazard, and I fear that I have lost."

I fell at his feet, clinging to him, and looking up into his face.

"Let me go!" I sobbed. "Let me go now, and I will pardon everything—no one shall know what you have done—I will be silent—only let me go! for God's sake let me go!"

He bent over me, and took my face between his hands. I did not resist, for I thought that his heart was yielding. All my thought was how to escape from this man, for whom I felt an ever-increasing terror.

"My poor Catherine!" he said, and I saw that his eyes were dim with tears. "If you knew how my heart has bled for you! if you knew how I have cursed myself for seeming so unkind to what I love so dearly. Can you forgive me after all?"

"Yes, yes," I murmured eagerly. "I will forgive—I will forget—only let me go! I am sure you do not wish to harm me—you have been mad, but it is over now—and —and——"

My voice died away in sobs as he said, bending down and kissing me on the forehead—

"You are right—I have been mad—but I am mad still, and I feel sometimes as if I should never be sane again. Yet I love you! I love you!"

I think he would have lifted me and folded me in his arms, but I rose quickly and drew myself away.

"You will do as you wish?" I cried.

"I cannot," he replied. "If I hid that, I should lose you for ever!"

"Do not speak of that, but do as I entreat, as I command. You have done evil enough already—do not add to it—do not make me hate you even more."

He turned from me and paced the room in gloomy thought. I watched him anxiously. At last he turned to me again, saying:

"Will you promise to become my wife?"

"I will not promise what I can never perform," was my reply.

"Catherine, your reputation is at stake. You know what people will say when they know that you have been here with me?"

"I do not care. I have promised to be silent, but if the truth is ever known, it will be clear that I am not to blame."

"You said you hated me. Is that true?"

"I don't know. I can only think of one thing, how to leave this dreadful place. Don't torture me. Prove your love and set me free."

Again he paced the room, and again I watched him anxiously.

"You must remain a little longer," he said, at last. "My mind is swept this way and that, and I cannot decide. You shall hear from me to-night."

He left abruptly, and I still remained a prisoner.

The day passed, and I saw no more of Mr. Langford. By this time I had made up my mind that escape was impossible, but feeling convinced that no further violence would be attempted, I resigned myself to my captivity. Still eager for some means of evading my gaolers, I conversed freely with the old crone, and even at her request

partook of a little food. Most of her talk consisted of warm panegyrics on her master, whom she regarded as the greatest and best of human beings.

Her name, I found, was Nannie Connolly, the old man was her husband, and the two younger men whom I had seen were her sons. All of them were devoted to their master, as was clearly shown, indeed, by the risks they had run in exposing themselves to the punishment of the law.

Just after nightfall, Nannie brought me a letter.

It was written by Mr. Langford, and ran as follows :

"I will not visit you to-night, for it is torture for me to refuse you anything. I loathe myself for what I have done, but I am like a ship

without helm or sail, driven along helplessly at the mercy of the storm. It is right you should know that the police have arrested Patrick Blake, on suspicion of being concerned in your disappearance. The man is a worthless ruffian, but in this respect, as you know, he is quite innocent. What a coward you will think me, to stand by silently and hear another man accused of my crime. Do not judge me too harshly, however. No harm shall come to him through me, although I cannot yet make up my mind how to act.

"P. L."

This communication only served to deepen my sense of shame and horror. I sent a message to the writer, demanding to see him immediately, but he refused to come.

All my anxiety now was for my unfortunate cousin. I could not bear to think that he should be suffering so unjustly.

The night passed, and for the first time I slept soundly, though my sleep was troubled with feverish dreams.

Why enter into the dismal particulars of the rest of my captivity? As every one now knows, I was kept at Langford House for three long weary nights, in spite of my constant entreaties and prayers. No one suspected my hiding-place, for few creatures at any time approached that lonely dwelling, and the police regarded Mr. Langford as above suspicion.

From time to time my captor appeared before me, but the result of our interviews was invariably the same, until the morning of the third

day, when he appeared before me booted and spurred, and said quietly :

"I am riding over to Newport, where your cousin is to be brought before the magistrates. I have been subpœnaed to bear witness against him." He added, while I looked at him in horror, "Do not distress yourself on his account—he will be discharged. You will write a letter from Craig Castle saying that you are safe and well, you will send it on to the court by special messenger, and the result will be your cousin's immediate release."

"Then I am at liberty to depart?"

"Yes. My boatmen will row you across the bay, and you will alight close at your own door."

He was so calm, so inscrutable, that I was puzzled.

"As to your account of what has taken place," he continued, "you will use your own discretion. I deserve no consideration, and expect to receive none. I have played my last card and lost the game. Be assured that no evil tongue will ever injure you while I am alive to justify you and to condemn myself."

Thus it happened that I returned to my home in the very boat which had conveyed me away on the memorable night of my abduction. Old Nannie wrapt around me a warm peasant cloak of her own, and parted from me with many blessings.

Mr. Langford followed me to the shore and helped me to my seat behind the rowers—old Michael Connolly and his two sons.

The boat pushed off and I did

not speak a word. As we rowed away Mr. Langford stood on the shore, bareheaded, watching me depart.

I shall never forget the expression of his despairing face.

Unseen by any one I quitted the boat on the shore of my own estate. No one saw me, for thick woodlands screen the seashore from the Castle.

As I turned to go, the old man, Connolly, stood, hat in hand, with the tears streaming down his face, but he was not thinking of himself.

"God bless your ladyship," he said. "Don't spake against the poor masther. His heart is broke intirely."

Thus, to the surprise of my servants, I re-entered my home, and going at once to my boudoir, wrote the letter which Mr. Lang-

ford showed to the magistrates. During the run homeward, I had quite made up mind not to say one word which could implicate the really guilty person. I needed no one to tell me that his shame and misery were already deep enough, and in spite of my indignation at his conduct, I pitied him with all my soul.

I have now set down the whole facts so far, at least, as I know them connected with my abduction. It is my fervent prayer that they may never be published to the world, but may remain secret in the bosoms of the persons chiefly concerned, with the single exception of that good man whom I have called in all sincerity my only friend.

Before closing this page of my life for ever, I wish to mention

only one more circumstance. Shortly after my liberation I paid a visit to my cousin, Patrick Blake, and as some compensation for the indignity and annoyance to which he had been subjected on my account, offered him a considerable share of my inheritance, to be paid to him regularly through my bankers. He accepted this gift without hesitation, pledging himself in return to forget all past misunderstandings.

CATHERINE POWER.

CHAPTER IX.

SEVERAL weeks passed, and the mysterious affair which had so ominous a beginning and so extraordinary a termination was almost forgotten. Miss Power remained in England, now and then sending a few lines to Father O'Donnell and receiving a letter from him in return. Wisely enough, the worthy priest, in his communication alluded scarcely at

all to the past. He rejoiced to learn that Catherine was, according to her own account, well and happy, and fearful of opening up old wounds, he made no mention of the individual who had caused them.

But one morning in early spring Catherine received a letter from the priest containing, among other less interesting local gossip, the following passage :

"I had intended, my dear child, never to torment you with any news which might remind you of what you suffered when residing here in Ireland. Such things are best forgotten. But unfortunately I am now compelled to break my resolution. It is only just to you and to the unhappy man of whom I write that I should do so.

"You must know then that a few days ago, while riding at night

through the mountains, Mr. Philip Langford was shot at by some person or persons unknown and dangerously wounded. His horse galloped home without him, and his servants, taking the alarm, went out to search for their missing master. They discovered him at daybreak, lying insensible on the highway between Newport and Mulrany, and carried him home.

"Medical assistance was sent for, and it was found that he had been shot in the back by a gun loaded with slugs, and that his wounds were in all probability mortal.

"On hearing the news I could not help thinking to myself 'this is the punishment of God!' Yet I could have wished that it had come to the unhappy man in some less dreadful fashion.

"I visited him yesterday, as in

duty bound. I found him conscious, and lying in a darkened room. He told me that he believed himself to be dying, and he entreated me to convey to you the assurance of his penitence for the great wrong he had done you. I promised to send this message to you, and besought him to make his peace with God. At his desire he confessed to me, and I absolved him. To-day I am going to visit him again. Dr. Croley assures me that there is little or no hope of his recovery.

"I forgot to mention that Mr. Langford himself has no suspicion as to his assailant—indeed, he seems quite indifferent on the subject, and when interrogated by the police, was unable to give them any information. I have my own suspicions, but, of course, they are only suspicions. But of one thing I am

certain—that if the unhappy man dies, his death will give rise to further trouble. The Connollys, father and sons, adore Mr. Langford, and in expressing to me their belief that the man who shot at him was your cousin, Patrick Blake, or if not Blake himself, one of his creatures, they have clearly intimated that they will retaliate and avenge their master. Thus, you see, one evil deed begets another. Here, in Connaught, the peasantry still retain the savage spirit of the vendetta, and I dread what may shortly happen."

A week after Catherine received this comunication, Philip Langford was still living, but tossing in fever, he hovered between life and death. By his bedside, in the darkened room, sat a woman, dressed simply and plainly like a hospital nurse.

The doctor, a young, powerful-looking man, was bending over the bed taking the patient's temperature.

After some minutes he left the room, beckoning to the woman to follow.

"The fever's on the turn," he whispered, outside the door. "If his strength keeps up he may pull through after all."

"Thank God!" said the woman. "Oh, Doctor Croley, save him, save him!"

"Sure, I'll do my best," answered the doctor, "but you must help me. It's lucky, indeed, he is to have a nurse like you."

Several days later the fever had almost passed away. Langford opened his eyes from a sound sleep, and encountered the bright gleam of two black eyes—those of Father John O'Donnell.

"You're better now, my son," said the good priest, gently patting the wasted hand which lay on the coverlet, "and soon, with God's blessing, you will be up and about."

The invalid shook his head sadly.

"I'm not looking for that," he said.

"Don't you want to live?" asked the other. "Come, now, I wrote Miss Power your message, and like an angel as she is, she has sent you her forgiveness. Isn't that enough to put life into you," he added, smiling.

"God bless her," said Langford, answering the smile sadly and wearily. "All the time, while I've been lying here, I've been thinking of her, and sometimes it seemed she was by me, looking down and smiling sweetly on me. When I am gone, Father, tell her

that I died blessing her. I couldn't help loving her! I couldn't help loving her!"

"More shame to ye!" exclaimed the priest, beaming benignantly. "Love's a snare, sir, and a delusion. And ye behaved like a scoundrel entirely!"

"God knows I did, Father; it was in this very room that I kept her a prisoner, and to be lying here, where she was once, is like lying in the light of heaven."

"Ye're a profane man," returned O'Donnell, with an expression that belied the rebuke, "and I'm shocked at you. Will ye promise to get well, now, if I overlook your depravity?"

"There is nothing left to live for. She was the light of my life, the pulse of my heart, the breath of my breath, and I loved her better

than God. May He bless her now and for ever, but I wish to die."

As he spoke he heard the sound of a low sob, and turning his face to the bedside, he saw a woman near him, with her eyes fixed on his.

"Catherine," he murmured, gazing at the vision like one in a dream, but as he spoke the word, two loving arms were thrown around him, and a warm cheek, wet with tears, was pressed against his arm.

"Yes, Philip," said the voice of his beloved. "I am here beside you, and you are going to live for my sake. Don't you remember what I once told you—that there was something charming in the old days, when marriage by capture was the fashion, and the strongest man won? And how, I said too,

that I would never surrender to any man, unless he made me?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, dear," continued Catherine, sobbing and laughing together, "I've come back to tell you that you were the strongest, and that, if you don't mind, and promise to get well quickly, I'm going to marry you after all.'

THE END.

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